1

AGAINST POPULARIZATION

PERHAPS THE MOST DIFFICULT THING in the world to bear is the foolishness of a great number, and even the majority of men, especially in our time, a foolishness which grows ever greater in the measure that the intellectual decline characteristic of the last cyclic period becomes more general and accentuated. To this must be joined ignorance, or more precisely a certain kind of ignorance that is closely linked to it, one wholly unconscious of itself and asserting itself all the more audaciously in the degree that it knows and understands less, and as a result is an irremediable evil for those afflicted by it.[1] Foolishness and ignorance can in short be united under the common name of incomprehension; but it must be understood that to endure this incomprehension in no way implies that one must make any concessions to it, nor even abstain from correcting the errors it gives rise to and doing all that is possible to prevent it from spreading, which, moreover, is very often a most unpleasant task, especially when the obstinacy of some people obliges one to repeat many times what normally it should suffice to say only once. This obstinacy which one thus comes up against is, furthermore, not always exempt from bad faith; and, to speak the truth, bad faith itself strongly implies a narrowness of view which is

1. In the Islamic tradition, *haqīqatu-zakāh* (the 'truth' of almsgiving) in its inward and most real aspect consists in bearing human foolishness and ignorance (*haqīqah* here is opposed to *muzāherah*, which is only the outward manifestation or the accomplishment of the precept taken in its strictly literal sense). This naturally arises from the virtue of 'patience' (*as-ṣabr*), to which a very special importance is attached, as is proved by the fact that it is mentioned 72 times in the Koran.

after all only the result of a more or less complete incomprehension; thus real incomprehension and bad faith, or stupidity and malice, intermingle in such a way that it is sometimes very difficult to determine the part each plays.

In speaking of concessions made to incomprehension, we are thinking especially of popularization in all its forms: can wishing to 'put within the reach of everyone' truths of any sort—or what at least are considered to be truths—'available to everyone', when this 'everyone' necessarily includes a great majority of the foolish and ignorant, really be anything other than this? Moreover, popularization proceeds from an eminently profane solicitude, and just as with any propaganda, it presupposes a certain degree of incomprehension on the part of those who indulge in it, no doubt relatively less than in the 'general public' to which it is addressed, but all the greater to the extent that what they thus claim to expound exceeds this public's mental level. This is why the drawbacks of popularization are more limited when what it attempts to diffuse is likewise wholly profane, like modern philosophical and scientific conceptions which, even as to those portions of truth they may happen to possess, certainly contain nothing profound or transcendent. This is moreover the most frequent case, since it is especially these things that interest the 'general public' due to the education that it has received, and this is also what most easily gives it the agreeable illusion of a 'knowledge' acquired at little cost. The popularizer always distorts things by simplification, and also by affirming peremptorily what the experts themselves regard as but mere hypotheses; but after all, in taking such an attitude he only continues the methods used in the rudimentary education that is imposed on everyone in the modern world and which, basically, is itself nothing but popularization, in a sense perhaps the worst popularization of all, for it gives the mentality of those who receive it a 'scientistic' imprint of which few are later able to rid themselves, and which the work of the popularizers properly so called only maintains and further reinforces, which attenuates their responsibility to a degree.

There is at present another sort of popularization which, although reaching a more restricted public, seems to present more serious dangers if only because of the confusions it can intentionally

or unintentionally provoke, and which aims at things that by their nature ought most of all to be sheltered from such attempts; we mean traditional doctrines and, more particularly, Eastern doctrines. To tell the truth, the occultists and Theosophists have already attempted something of this sort, but have succeeded only in producing gross counterfeits. The attempts we now have in mind take on a more serious appearance, a more 'respectable' appearance we might say, which can overawe many people who would not have been seduced by distortions that are too obviously caricatures. Moreover, there is a distinction to make among popularizers with regard to their intentions if not to the results they achieve. Naturally, they all equally wish to spread the ideas they expound as widely as possible, but they can be moved by very different motives. On one hand, there are propagandists whose sincerity is certainly not in doubt but whose very attitude proves that their doctrinal comprehension does not go very far; what is more, even within the limits of what they understand, the needs of propaganda necessarily lead them to accommodate the mentality of those they address, which, especially when it is a question of an 'average' Western public, can only be to the detriment of the truth; the most curious thing is that this is such a necessity for them that it would be wholly unjust to accuse them of intentionally altering this truth. On the other hand, there are those who, at heart, are only indifferently interested in doctrines but who, having seen the widespread success of these things and hoping to profit from this 'fashion', have made a veritable commercial enterprise of it. Such people are much more 'eclectic' than the former and spread indiscriminately whatever seems to satisfy the taste of a certain 'clientele', which is obviously their principal concern even when they feel obliged to exhibit some claim to 'spirituality'. Of course, we do not wish to mention any names, but we think that many of our readers could themselves easily find examples of either case; and we are not speaking of mere charlatans as are found especially among the pseudo-esoterists, who knowingly deceive the public by presenting their own inventions under the label of doctrines about which they are almost wholly ignorant, thus further augmenting the mental confusion of this unfortunate public.

What is most troubling in all of this, besides the false or 'simplistic' ideas of traditional doctrines that are spread in this way, is that so many people do not even know how to distinguish between the work of these popularizers of every kind and an exposition made without any concern of pleasing the public or of putting it within their reach. They put everything on the same level and go so far as to attribute the same intentions to everything, even what is really furthest from them. This is stupidity pure and simple, but sometimes also bad faith, or more likely a mixture of both. To take an example that concerns us directly: after we have on every occasion clearly explained why and for what reasons we are resolutely opposed to all propaganda as well as to all popularization, and seeing that we have so often protested against the assertions of certain people who, despite this, still attribute propagandist motives to us, how is it still possible to think that these people or others like them are really acting in good faith when we see them indefinitely repeating the same calumny? Even though lacking any comprehension of the doctrines in question, if they at least had the smallest sense of logic, we would ask them to tell us what interest we could have in seeking to convince anyone whatsoever of the truth of this or that idea, and we are very sure that they would never find an answer to this question that would be to the slightest degree plausible. Indeed, among the propagandists and popularizers, some are this way because of a misplaced sentimentality, others because they find therein some material profit; but it is only too evident from the way in which we have explained doctrines that neither one nor the other of these two motives enters in the least into our work, and even if it be supposed that we ever had the intention of creating any sort of propaganda, we would then have necessarily adopted an attitude wholly contrary to the rigorous doctrinal strictness that we have constantly maintained. We do not wish to dwell further on this, but having for some time perceived from various quarters a strange recrudescence of the most unjust and most unjustifiable attacks, it seemed to us necessary, at the risk of drawing upon ourselves the reproach of repeating ourselves too often, to rectify things once more.

2

METAPHYSICS AND DIALECTIC

We recently learned of an article that seems to deserve some attention because certain of the misapprehensions it evinces have been taken so far.[1] We were of course amused to read that those 'who have some experience of metaphysical knowledge' (among whom the author obviously places himself even while, with a remarkable impudence, denying us the privilege, as if he could possibly know!) will find nothing in our work but 'remarkably precise conceptual distinctions', that is, distinctions of a 'purely dialectical order', and 'representations that may serve as useful pre-liminaries, but that from the practical and methodological point of view do not advance one step beyond the realm of words toward the universal.' But we greatly fear that our contemporaries, so accustomed to stopping at external appearances, will commit similar errors: when we see them falling into error regarding traditional authorities such as Shankarāchārya for example, there is assuredly no reason for surprise that they do the same with regard to us, taking the 'husk' for the 'kernel'. However this may be, we would like to know how truth of any order whatsoever could be expressed without the use of words (excepting the case of purely symbolic figures, which are not under discussion here) and without a 'dialectical' form—in short,

1. Massimo Scaligero, *Esoterismo moderno: l'opera e il pensiero de René Guénon*, in the first issue of the new Italian journal *Imperium* (May, 1950). The expression 'modern esoterism' is itself already rather significant because it is a self-contradictory statement, and then again because there is quite obviously nothing 'modern' about our work, which is on the contrary and in every respect the very opposite of the modern spirit.

those discursive forms imposed by the very requirements of all human language—and also, given the subject under discussion, how any verbal explanation, whether written or oral, could be more than a 'useful preliminary'. It seems however that we have sufficiently stressed the essentially preparatory character of all theoretical knowledge, which is obviously the only knowledge that can be attained through a study of such explanations; but this is not at all to say that, in this respect and within these limits, it is not rigorously indispensable for all those who then wish to go further. And to avoid any misunderstanding let us immediately add that, contrary to what is said regarding a passage from our *Perspectives on Initiation*, we have never had the intention of saying anything about either our own 'inner experience', which is of no concern or interest to anyone, or anyone else's, since it is always something strictly incommunicable by its very nature.

Fundamentally, the author scarcely seems to understand what we mean by the term 'metaphysical', and even less what we mean by 'pure intellectuality', the 'transcendent' character of which he would like to deny, thus betraying the common confusion between intellect and reason, an error not unrelated to another he commits concerning the role of 'dialectic' in our writings (and, we could also say, in any writing concerned with this same realm). This is all too obvious when he asserts that 'the ultimate meaning of our work,' about which he speaks with an assurance that his incomprehension scarcely warrants, resides in a 'mental transparency, not recognized as such and with limits that are still "human", which we see at work when we take this transparency for effective initiation.' Faced with such assertions, we must once again repeat as clearly as possible that there is absolutely no difference between pure and transcendent intellectual knowledge (which, as such and contrary rational knowledge, has nothing 'mental' or 'human' about it), that is to say effective and not merely theoretical metaphysical knowledge, and initiatic realization, any more than between pure intellectuality and true spirituality.

This explains why the author considered it necessary to speak out, and even with some vehemence, about our 'thought', that is, about something which strictly speaking ought to be considered as

non-existent, or at least ought to count for nothing when applied to our work, since it is not at all what we have put into the latter, which is exclusively an exposition of traditional data—only the expression being our own; this data, furthermore, is not the product of any kind of 'thought' whatsoever, by very reason of its traditional character, which essentially implies a supra-individual and 'non-human' origin. His error in this regard appears most clearly when he claims that we have 'mentally rejoined' the idea of the Infinite, which moreover is an impossibility; we have not in fact 'rejoined' it mentally or otherwise, for this idea (and again, this word can only be used in such cases if we rid it of the exclusively 'psychological' meaning currently ascribed to it) can only be grasped directly by an immediate intuition that belongs, we repeat, to the domain of pure intellectuality; all the rest are but means intended to prepare for this intuition those capable of it. It must be understood that as long as they are only 'thinking' through these means they will achieve no effective results, any more than someone who reasons or reflects on what are commonly called the 'proofs of the existence of God' will attain an effective knowledge of Divinity by this means alone. What it is necessary to know is that 'concepts' as such, and above all 'abstractions', do not interest us in the least (it goes without saying that this 'us' includes all who, like ourselves, adopt a strictly and integrally traditional point of view), and we willingly leave all these mental elaborations to philosophers and other 'thinkers'.[2] But when obliged to explain matters of an altogether different order, and especially in a Western language, we fail to see how one can avoid using words that in the majority of cases in fact only express simple concepts in current usage, since there are no others at our disposal;[3] if some are incapable of understanding the transposition that must be

2. For us, the very type of the 'thinker', in the proper sense of the word, is Descartes; whoever is simply that and nothing more will inevitably become a 'rationalist', since he is incapable of passing beyond the exercise of the purely individual and human faculties and is hence necessarily unaware of anything beyond their reach, which means that he can only be 'agnostic' regarding everything pertaining to the metaphysical and transcendent realm.

3. We need only except those words stemming from traditional terminology, in which case it is naturally enough to restore their original meaning.

effectuated in such a case in order to fathom the 'ultimate meaning', there is unfortunately nothing we can do about it. As for trying to discover in our work traces of the 'limits of our own knowledge', this is a waste of time, for, aside from this having nothing to do with 'us', our explanations are strictly impersonal by the very fact that they refer exclusively to truths of a traditional order; and, if we have not always succeeded in making this characteristic perfectly obvious, this should be ascribed rather to difficulties of expression.[4] This reminds us only too well of those who suppose that anyone who intentionally refrains from speaking about a thing is either ignorant of it, or does not understand it!

As for 'esoteric dialectic', this expression is acceptable only if one means by it dialectic in the service of esoterism as the external means used to communicate what can be expressed verbally, and always with the reservation that such an expression is necessarily inadequate, especially in the purely metaphysical order, by the very fact that it is formulated in 'human' terms. Dialectic is after all nothing but the use or practical application of logic;[5] now it hardly needs pointing out that the moment one wishes to say something it becomes necessary to conform to the laws of logic, which certainly does not mean that in themselves the truths to be expressed are dependent on these laws, any more than the fact that a draftsman is obliged to sketch a picture of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface thereby proves his ignorance of the existence of the third dimension. Logic does in fact dominate everything pertaining to reason, and, as its name indicates, this is its proper domain; but on the other hand everything of the supra-individual—and therefore supra-rational—order by this very fact obviously escapes that domain, for the superior could not be subservient to

4. In this respect, we have always regretted that the habits of our times have not permitted us to publish our works in the strictest anonymity, which, if nothing else, would have forestalled the writing of much nonsense and spared us the trouble of taking it up and correcting it.

5. We are of course taking 'dialectic' strictly in its original sense—the sense it had, for example, for Plato and Aristotle—without being in the least concerned about the special meanings attributed to it nowadays, which are derived more or less directly from Hegel's philosophy.

the inferior. Regarding truths of this order, logic can therefore only intervene in an incidental way, and their expression in discursive, or 'dialectical' mode is a kind of 'descent' to the individual level, failing which these truths would remain totally incommunicable.[6]

With singular inconsistency the author, even while reproaching us—through pure and simple incomprehension moreover—for stopping at the 'mental' level without realizing it, seems particularly embarrassed by the fact that we speak of the 'renunciation of the mental'. What he says on this subject is quite confused, but at bottom he seems unwilling to admit that the limits of individuality can be transcended, and that, as regards realization, for him everything is restricted (if we may express it so) to a sort of 'exaltation' of these limits, since he claims that 'the individual, by itself, tends to rediscover its original source,' which is precisely an impossibility for the individual as such since it obviously cannot surpass itself by its own means; and if this source were of an individual order, it would still be something very relative. If the being which is a human individual were truly nothing more than a being in a certain state of manifestation, there would be no way for him to emerge from the conditions of this state, and as long as he has not effectively emerged from it, that is, as long as he is still only an individual according to appearances (and we must not forget that for his present consciousness these appearances are confounded with reality itself, since they are all that he can attain of it), all that is necessary to enable him to go beyond them can only present itself as 'external',[7] for he has not yet

6. We shall not dwell on the reproach addressed to us that we speak 'as if transcendence and so-called external reality were separate from each other'; if the author knew what we have stated about 'descending realization'—or if he had understood it—he would certainly have dispensed with this criticism. This does not in any case alter the fact that this separation really exists 'in its own order', which is that of contingent existence, and that it ceases only for the one who has passed beyond this existence and is definitively free of its limiting conditions; whatever he may think, it is always important to know how to situate each thing in its rightful place, and at its proper degree of reality, and these are surely not distinctions of a 'purely dialectical order'!

7. It hardly seems necessary to remind the reader here that initiation naturally takes the aspirant as he is in his present state, in order to give him the means for transcending it, which is why such means may at first seem 'external'.

arrived at the stage where such distinctions as 'interior' and 'exterior' cease to be valid. Every conception that tends to deny these incontestable truths is nothing but a manifestation of modern individualism, whatever illusions those who hold to them may entertain in this regard;[8] and in the present instance the final conclusions, which are in fact equivalent to a negation of tradition and initiation under the pretext of rejecting all recourse to 'exterior' means of realization, show only too well that this is indeed so.

The author's conclusions now remain to be examined, and here there is at least one passage we must cite in its entirety: 'In the interior constitution of modern man there is a fracture that makes tradition appear to be an external collection of doctrines and rites, and not a supra-human current of life into which he might plunge himself in order to revive; in modern man lives the error that separates the transcendent world from that of the senses, so that he perceives the latter as deprived of the Divine; hence re-union or reintegration cannot come about through an initiatic form that antedates the time in which such an error became an accomplished fact.' We, too, are altogether of the opinion that this is indeed a most serious error, and also that this error, which properly speaking constitutes the profane point of view, is so characteristic of the modern spirit itself as to be truly inseparable from it, to the extent that, for those dominated by this spirit, there is no hope of freeing themselves from it. It is obvious that from the initiatic point of view this error is an insurmountable 'disqualification', which is why 'modern man' is really unfit to receive an initiation, or at least to attain to effective initiation; but we should add that there are exceptions, because in spite of everything even in the West today there are men who, by their 'interior constitution', are not 'modern men' but are capable of grasping the essence of tradition and do not accept this profane error as a *fait accompli*; and it is to these that we have always intended to address ourselves exclusively. But this is not all, for the author next falls into a curious contradiction, for he seems to want to present as 'progress' what he first recognized as error. Let us again quote his own words:

8. At present, many people sincerely believe themselves to be 'anti-modern', and yet are deeply affected by the influence of the modern spirit, which moreover is merely one of many examples of the confusion that reigns everywhere in our time.

> To hypnotize men with the mirage of tradition and of an 'orthodox' organization to transmit initiation is in effect to paralyze that possibility of liberation and the conquest of liberty that for present-day man lies strictly in the fact that he has attained the ultimate degree of knowledge, that he has become conscious even to the point that the gods, the oracles, the myths, and the initiatic transmissions are no longer effective.

This is assuredly a strange misunderstanding of the real situation, for never has man been further than at present from the 'ultimate degree of knowledge', unless this be understood in the descending direction, and if he has really arrived at the point where all the things enumerated above no longer have an effect on him, it is not because he has climbed too high, but on the contrary because he has fallen too low, as is shown moreover by the fact that their many more or less crude counterfeits are quite effective in unbalancing him further. There is much talk about 'autonomy', the 'conquest of liberty', and so forth, always understood in a purely individualistic sense, but it is forgotten, or rather, remains un-known, that true liberation is only possible through emancipation from the limits inherent to the individual condition; one no longer wishes to hear of regular initiatic transmission or of traditional orthodox organizations, but what of the altogether comparable case of a man who, on the point of drowning, refuses the help offered him by a rescuer because it is 'external'? Whether we like it or not, the truth is—and this has nothing to do with any 'dialectic' whatsoever—that outside of an affiliation with a traditional organization, there is no initiation, and that without first being initiated, no metaphysical realization is possible; these are neither 'mirages' and 'ideal' illusions, nor vain 'speculations of thought', but entirely positive realities. Doubtless our opponent will argue that anything we say remains in the 'realm of words'; by the very nature of things, this is only too evident, and is equally true of what he says, but with one essential difference: however convinced he himself may be to the contrary, his words, for whoever understands their 'ultimate meaning', reflect nothing but the mental attitude of a profane person; and we ask him to believe that this is not meant as an insult on our part, but is merely the 'technical' expression of a simple fact.

3

THE MALADY OF ANGUISH

THESE DAYS it is the fashion in certain circles to speak of 'metaphysical anxiety', and even of 'metaphysical anguish'. These patently absurd expressions give further proof of the mental disorder of our time; but, as always in such a case, there may be some interest in trying to find out precisely what lies behind these errors and what exactly such an abuse of language implies. It is clear enough that those who speak in this way do not have the slightest notion of what metaphysics really is. But one may still wonder why they wish to transpose these terms anxiety and anguish into whatever notion they have of this domain—of which they are ignorant—rather than any others that would be neither more nor less out of place. No doubt, the first or most immediate reason for this lies in the fact that these words represent certain sentiments particularly characteristic of the present age; and the predominance they have acquired today is moreover quite comprehensible, and could even be considered legitimate in a certain sense if it were limited to the order of contingencies, for it is manifestly only too well justified by the present state of disequilibrium and instability of all things, a state which continues to worsen and is certainly not calculated to give a feeling of security to those who live in such a troubled world. If there is something morbid in these sentiments, it is that the state through which they are occasioned and maintained is itself abnormal and disordered; but all this, which amounts to no more than a simple explanation of fact, does not sufficiently take into account the intrusion of these same sentiments into the intellectual order, or at least into what lays claim to its place among our contemporaries;

this intrusion shows that the evil runs much deeper, and that there must be something in it related to the whole of the mental deviation of the modern world.

In this connection we may note first of all that the perpetual restlessness of the moderns is nothing other than one form of the need for agitation that we have often denounced, a need that in the mental order takes the form of research for its own sake, that is, research which, rather than leading to knowledge as it normally should, is pursued indefinitely and leads nowhere, and which moreover is undertaken without any intention of attaining truth, something in which so many of our contemporaries do not even believe. We admit that a certain anxiety may have its legitimate place at the starting-point of any inquiry as a motive inciting that very inquiry, for it goes without saying that if man were satisfied with his state of ignorance, he would remain in it indefinitely and never seek to escape it; but even so, it would be better to give such mental anxiety another name: in reality it is nothing other than the 'wonder' that according to Aristotle is the beginning of knowledge, and which of course has nothing in common with the purely practical needs to which the 'empiricists' and 'pragmatists' attribute the origin of all human knowledge. But in any case, whether one calls it anxiety or wonder it is something that could have no raison d'être nor subsist in any way once the inquiry has attained its goal, that is, once the knowledge in question has been attained—whatever order of knowledge is involved moreover; and its complete and definitive disappearance is all the more necessary when it is a question of knowledge par excellence, that is, knowledge of the metaphysical domain. One can thus see in the idea of an anxiety that has no end, and hence does not serve to draw man out of his ignorance, the mark of a sort of 'agnosticism', which may be more or less unconscious as the case may be, but which is no less real for all that. Whether one likes it or not, to speak of metaphysical 'anxiety' is basically equivalent either to denying metaphysical knowledge itself, or at the very least to declaring one's powerlessness to obtain it, which in practical terms amounts to no great difference. And when this 'agnosticism' is truly unconscious it is usually accompanied by an illusion that consists of mistaking for metaphysics something

that is not only no such thing but that is not even to any degree a valid knowledge, even of a relative order. By this we mean the 'pseudo-metaphysics' of modern philosophers, which in effect is incapable of dispelling the slightest anxiety by the very fact that it is not a true knowledge, and which on the contrary cannot but increase the intellectual disorder and confusion of ideas in those who take it seriously, thereby rendering their ignorance all the more incurable. From this, as from every other point of view, false knowledge is certainly worse than simple unsophisticated ignorance.

As we have said, some people do not confine themselves to speaking of 'anxiety', but even go so far as to speak of 'anguish', which is more serious still, and expresses an attitude still more clearly anti-metaphysical, if that is possible; the two sentiments moreover are more or less connected in that both are rooted in ignorance. Anguish indeed is only an extreme and, so to speak, 'chronic' form of fear; now man is naturally inclined to fear what he does not know or understand, and this fear becomes an obstacle preventing him from conquering his ignorance, for it leads him to turn away from the object in whose presence he feels fear and to which he attributes its cause, whereas in reality that cause may perhaps reside only in himself; moreover, this negative reaction is only too often followed by a veritable hatred with respect to the unknown, especially if the person in question labors more or less confusedly under the impression that this unknown is something that exceeds his present possibilities of comprehension. If however the ignorance can be dispelled, the fear will immediately vanish by that very fact, as in the well-known example of the rope mistaken for a serpent; fear, and hence anguish, which is only one of its particular forms, is therefore incompatible with knowledge, and if it advances to such a point that it is truly invincible, knowledge will have been rendered impossible, even in the absence of any other hindrance inherent in the nature of the individual. In this sense one can thus speak, not of a 'metaphysical anguish', but on the contrary of an 'anti-metaphysical anguish' playing in a way the role of a veritable 'guardian of the threshold'—to use to a Hermetic expression—and forbidding man all access to the domain of metaphysical knowledge.

It is still necessary to explain more completely how fear results from ignorance, especially since we have recently come across a quite astonishing error on this subject: we have seen the origin of fear attributed to a feeling of isolation, and this in an exposition based on the Vedantic doctrine, whereas this latter expressly teaches, on the contrary, that fear is due to the feeling of duality; and indeed, if a man were truly alone, of what could he be afraid? It will perhaps be said that he may be afraid of something to be found within himself, but even this implies that in his present condition there are within him elements that escape his own understanding and are consequently a non-unified multiplicity; moreover, whether he is isolated or not changes nothing and in no way enters into such a case. On the other hand, one cannot validly invoke, in favor of this explanation by isolation, the instinctive fear of the dark that is felt by most people, especially children; in reality this fear is due to the idea that darkness may conceal things that one cannot see and that are therefore not known and for that very reason frightening; if, however, the darkness were considered as empty of all unknown presences, the fear would be without object and therefore would not arise. The truth is that the being experiencing fear seeks to isolate itself, but precisely in order to escape the fear; it adopts a negative attitude and 'withdraws', as if to avoid any possible contact with what it fears, whence undoubtedly arise the sensation of cold and other physiological symptoms that usually accompany fear. But this sort of unthinking defense is in any case ineffectual, for it is quite evident that, whatever a being may do, it cannot really isolate itself from the circumstances in which it is placed by the very conditions of its contingent existence, and that, so long as it considers itself surrounded by an 'external world', it is impossible that it find complete refuge from the latter. Fear can only be caused by the existence of other beings, which, insofar as they are other, constitute this 'external world', or other elements that, although incorporated in the being itself, are no less foreign and 'external' to his present consciousness; but the 'other' as such exists only by virtue of ignorance, since all consciousness essentially implies an identification. One can therefore say that the more a being knows, the less the 'other' or 'external' exists for it, and that in the same measure the possibility of

fear, an altogether negative possibility moreover, is likewise abolished for him, and, finally, that the state of absolute 'solitude' (*kaivalya*), which is beyond contingency, is a state of pure impassibility. Incidentally, let us note in this regard that the 'ataraxy' of the Stoics represents only a deformed conception of such a state, for it claims to apply to a being that in reality is still subject to contingencies, which is contradictory. To try to treat exterior things as indifferent—to the extent one can in the individual condition—may constitute a kind of preparatory exercise with a view to 'deliverance', but nothing more, since for the being that is truly 'delivered' there are no 'exterior' things; in short, such an exercise could be regarded as equivalent to what, in initiatic 'trials', expresses in one form or another the need to conquer fear at the outset in order to attain knowledge, which will in turn render that fear impossible because there will then no longer be anything by which the person could be affected; and it is obvious that one must take care not to confuse the preliminaries of initiation with its final result.

Another observation, admittedly secondary but nonetheless not without interest, is that the sensation of cold and the exterior symptoms to which we alluded just now are also produced even without the one who experiences them being consciously afraid properly speaking, in cases where psychic influences of the most inferior order manifest themselves, as for example in spiritualist seances and in the phenomena of 'haunting'. Here again it is a case of the same subconscious and almost 'organic' defense in the presence of something hostile and at the same time unknown, at least to the ordinary man, who effectively knows only what is susceptible of being grasped by the senses, that is, only things of the corporeal domain. The 'panic terrors' which occur without any apparent cause are also due to the presence of various influences that do not belong to the perceptible order; moreover, they are collective, which again contradicts the explanation of fear through isolation; and in this case it is not necessarily a question of hostile influences or of the inferior order, for it may even happen that a spiritual influence—and not merely a psychic one—provokes a terror of this kind among the 'profane', who perceive it vaguely without knowing anything of its

nature. An examination of these facts, which in short are not abnormal, despite common opinion, only further confirms that fear is indeed really caused by ignorance, and this is why we thought it well to note them in passing.

Returning to the essential point, we can now say that those who speak of 'metaphysical anguish' in the first place show thereby their total ignorance of metaphysics; furthermore, their very attitude renders this ignorance invincible, all the more so as anguish is not a simple momentary feeling of fear, but a fear become in a way permanent, installed in the very 'psychism' of the being, and that is why one can consider it a true 'malady': so long as it cannot be overcome it properly constitutes—as do all other serious defects of a psychic order—a 'disqualification' with respect to metaphysical knowledge. On the other hand, knowledge is the sole definitive remedy against anguish, as well as against fear in all its forms, and against simple anxiety, for these feelings are only the consequences or products of ignorance, and consequently, as soon as knowledge has been attained, it destroys them entirely at their very root and renders them henceforth impossible, whereas without it, even if they are momentarily put aside, they can always reappear under the pressure of circumstances. If it is a question of knowledge par excellence, this effect will necessarily have repercussions in all the various inferior domains, and thus such feelings will also disappear with regard to the most contingent things; indeed, how could they affect one who, seeing all things in their principle, knows that no matter what the appearances may be, they are ultimately only elements of the total order? What is true here is likewise true of all the evils from which the modern world suffers: the true remedy can come only from above, that is, from a restoration of pure intellectuality; as long as one seeks to remedy them from below, that is, resting content to oppose contingencies with other contingencies, all one's efforts will be vain and ineffectual—but who will prove able to understand this while there is still time?

4

CUSTOM VERSUS TRADITION

We have repeatedly denounced the strange confusion that the moderns constantly make between tradition and custom; indeed, our contemporaries are quite apt to give the name 'tradition' to all sorts of things that are really only customs, and often customs that are altogether insignificant and sometimes of very recent invention. Thus it is enough that some profane festival—established by anyone at all—simply endure a few years in order to be qualified as 'traditional'. This abuse of language is evidently due to modern man's ignorance of everything traditional in the true sense of the word; but one can also detect in this a manifestation of that spirit of 'counterfeit' to which we have drawn attention on so many other occasions: where nothing traditional any longer remains, people seek consciously or unconsciously to substitute for it a sort of parody that can so to speak fill—at least in outward appearance—the void left by its absence. It is then not sufficient to say that custom differs entirely from tradition, for the truth is that it is even in stark contrast to it, and that in more than one way it facilitates the diffusion and maintenance of the anti-traditional spirit.

What must be understood first and foremost is this: all that is of the traditional order implies essentially a 'supra-human' element, custom on the contrary being something purely human, whether by degeneration or by its very origin. Indeed, two cases must here be clearly distinguished. First there are things that might formerly have had a deeper meaning or even a properly ritual character, but which, having ceased to be integrated into a traditional whole, have lost it entirely and so are now no more than a 'dead letter' and a

'superstition' in the etymological sense; and since their purpose is no longer understood, they are particularly likely to be deformed and to become tainted with extrinsic elements arising from mere individual or collective fantasy. This is generally the case with customs to which it is impossible to assign a definite origin, the least that can be said of them being that they bear witness to the loss of the traditional spirit, and that they may be more serious as a symptom of this loss than they are in respect of their own drawbacks. Nonetheless, they still present a double danger: on the one hand, people are thus led to repeat actions simply from habit, that is, in a wholly mechanical fashion and without any valid reason, a result all the more unfortunate in that such a 'passive' attitude predisposes them to accept all sorts of 'suggestions' without reaction; on the other hand, by assimilating tradition to merely mechanical actions, the adversaries of tradition are not slow to take advantage of it by turning it to ridicule, so that this confusion, which with certain people is not entirely involuntary, is used to create an obstacle to any possibility of restoring the traditional spirit.

The second case is that where one can properly speak of 'counterfeits'. The customs we have just mentioned are, despite everything, still vestiges of something that originally possessed a traditional character, and as such they might not yet seem sufficiently profane. Thus the attempt, at a later stage, to replace them as much as possible by other customs that are wholly invented, which will be accepted all the more easily as people are already accustomed to doing things without meaning. And it is here that the 'suggestion' to which we just alluded intervenes. When people have been diverted from the accomplishment of their traditional rites, it is still possible that they will sense what is lacking and feel the need to return to them; to prevent this, 'pseudo-rites' are given them, and even imposed upon them if occasion allows; and this simulation of rites is sometimes pushed so far that there is no difficulty in recognizing the formal and scarcely disguised intention of establishing a sort of 'counter-tradition'. In this same order there are also other customs that, while apparently less offensive, are really far from being so, by which we mean customs that affect the life of each individual in particular rather than that of the whole collectivity; their role is again

to stifle any ritual or traditional activity by substituting for it a preoccupation—it would not be an exaggeration to say obsession—with a multitude of perfectly insignificant, if not completely absurd, things of which the very 'pettiness' powerfully contributes to the ruin of all intellectuality.

The dissolving character of custom can be discerned very clearly today in Eastern countries, for as concerns the West it has long since passed the stage where it was even conceivable that all human actions might have a traditional character; but where the idea of 'ordinary life' (understood in the profane sense that we have explained elsewhere) has not yet become general, one can as it were catch in the act the manner in which such a notion takes shape and the role played in this by the substitution of custom for tradition. It goes without saying that we are speaking of a mentality that, at least for the present,[1] is hardly that of most people of the East, and belongs only to those who can be said to be more or less 'modernized' or 'Westernized', the two words basically expressing one and the same thing: when someone acts in a way that he cannot justify except by declaring that 'it is the custom', one can be sure that one is dealing with an individual detached from his tradition and no longer capable of understanding it; not only does he no longer accomplish its essential rites, but if he does keep some of its secondary 'observances', this is solely 'by custom' and for purely human reasons, among which concern for 'opinion' holds a preponderant place; and above all he will never be found wanting in the scrupulous observance of a host of those invented customs of which we were just speaking, customs that are in no way different from the silliness that constitutes the 'good manners' of modern Westerners, and that are sometimes pure and simple imitations of them.

What is perhaps most striking in these wholly profane customs, whether of the East or the West, is the incredible 'pettiness' we have already mentioned; it seems that they aim at nothing more than

1. These words were written almost fifty years ago. Today the ratio of modernists to traditionalists is very likely reversed, even in the East. The reader should note that by 'Easterners' Guénon means 'people of the East' and not only the so-called yellow race. Ed.

directing all attention, not only to things that are entirely exterior and emptied of all meaning, but even to the very details of these things, to what is most banal and limited, which is obviously one of the best ways that exist to bring about a veritable intellectual atrophy in those who submit to it, and in the West what is called the 'worldly' mentality is the best example. Those in whom such preoccupations come to predominate, even without reaching this extreme degree, are only too manifestly incapable of conceiving any reality of a profound order; there is an incompatibility here so evident that it would be useless to dwell upon it further, and it is also clear that such people find themselves enclosed thenceforth in the circle of 'ordinary life', which is nothing, precisely, but a thick fabric of outward appearances like those on which they have been 'trained' to exclusively exercise all their mental activity. For them one might say that the world has lost all its 'transparency', for they no longer see in it anything that could be a sign or an expression of higher truths, and even if one were to speak to them of the inner meaning of things, not only would they fail to understand, but they would immediately begin to wonder what their peers might think or say of them if by chance they were to admit such a viewpoint, and even more conform their lives to it!

It is indeed the fear of 'opinion' that more than anything else allows custom to impose itself as it does and to take on the character of a veritable obsession: man can never act without some motive, legitimate or illegitimate, and when there can no longer exist any valid motive, as is the case here since we are speaking of actions that truly have no significance, one must then be found in an order that is as basely contingent and as deprived of all effective importance as is that to which these actions themselves belong. It might be objected that for this to be possible an opinion must already have been formed about the customs in question; but in fact it is enough that they be established in a very restricted milieu, even if at first merely as a 'fashion', for this factor to come into play. From this point, having become fixed by the very fact that no one dares any longer abstain from observing them, they can thereafter spread gradually, and correlatively what was initially only the opinion of a few ends by becoming what is called 'public opinion'. It could be

said that respect for custom as such is fundamentally nothing other than respect for human stupidity, for in such a case this is what is naturally expressed in public opinion; moreover, 'doing as everyone else does'—to use the current expression—which for some seems to take the place of sufficient reason in all their actions, is necessarily to assimilate oneself to the vulgar and to endeavor to become wholly indistinguishable from them; it surely would be difficult to imagine anything more base and also more contrary to the traditional attitude, according to which each person must constantly strive to raise himself in the full measure of his possibilities, rather than sink down to the sort of intellectual nullity represented by a life wholly absorbed in the observation of the silliest customs, all for puerile fear of being judged unfavorably by whomsoever may happen along, that is to say by the foolish and the ignorant.[2]

It is said in traditional Arab countries that in the most ancient times men were distinguished from one another only by their knowledge; later, birth and descent were considered; later still, wealth became a mark of superiority; and finally, in the last times, men are judged solely by outward appearance. It is easy to see that this is an exact description of the successive predominance, in descending order, of the respective points of view of the four castes, or, if one prefers, of the natural divisions to which these correspond. Now custom incontestably belongs to the domain of those purely outward appearances behind which nothing is concealed: to observe custom in order to fall in line with opinion that honors such appearances only is therefore properly the action of a Shūdra.

2. If this was true when Guénon wrote fifty years ago, how much more true is it today, when the mass media and the world-wide advertising industry have made a quasi-science out of profiting from customs and public opinion. Ed.

5

INITIATIC AFFILIATION

Most of our contemporaries, at least in the West, find certain matters so hard to understand that we are obliged to return to them repeatedly; and quite often these matters, which are at the root of all that is related to the traditional point of view in general or more especially to the esoteric and initiatic point of view in particular, are also of an order that ought normally to be regarded as rather elementary. Such for example is the question of the role and inherent efficacy of rites; and perhaps it is at least in part because of its rather close involvement with rites that the question of the need for initiatic affiliation seems to be in the same situation. Indeed, when one understands that initiation consists essentially in the transmission of a certain spiritual influence, and that this transmission can only be operated by means of a rite, which is precisely what effectuates the affiliation one to an organization that as its chief function conserves and communicates this influence, it does seem that there should no longer be any difficulty in this respect, for transmission and affiliation are fundamentally only the two inverse aspects of one and the same thing, according to whether it is envisaged as descending or ascending the initiatic 'chain'. Recently however we have had occasion to ascertain that this difficulty exists even for some who in fact have such an affiliation; this may seem rather astonishing, but we doubtless see here one result of the 'speculative' diminishment that the organization to which they belong has undergone, for it is obvious that for anyone who confines himself to this single 'speculative' point of view, questions of this order, as well as all those that might properly be called 'technical', will only appear in a very indirect and distant perspective, and it is also clear that by this very fact

their fundamental importance risks being more or less completely misunderstood. We might even say that such an example enables us to measure the distance separating 'virtual' from 'effective' initiation; not of course that the former can be regarded as negligible, for quite the contrary, it is this that constitutes initiation properly speaking, the indispensable 'beginning' (*initium*) that carries with it the possibility of all later developments. But we have to recognize that especially under present conditions, it is very far indeed from this virtual initiation to the slightest hint of realization. However this may be, we think we have already sufficiently ex-plained the need for initiatic affiliation,[1] but in the face of certain questions still being asked on this topic it will be useful to add a few points of detail to complement what we have already said.

We must first of all set aside the objection that some might be tempted to draw from the fact that the neophyte in no way experiences the spiritual influence at the actual moment of its reception; to tell the truth, this case is quite comparable to that of certain rites of an exoteric order, such, for example, as the religious rites of ordination, where a spiritual influence is also transmitted, and, at least in a general way, is no longer experienced either—which does not prevent it from being truly present and conferring upon those who receive it certain aptitudes that they would not have possessed without it. But in the initiatic order, we must go further; in a way it would be contradictory for the neophyte to be aware of the transmitted influence, since with respect to this influence as well as by definition he is still in a purely potential and 'non-developed' state, whereas the capacity to experience it would on the contrary necessarily imply a certain degree of development or actualization; and this is why we have just said that one must begin with a *virtual* initiation. But in the exoteric domain there is in fact no disadvantage in not having any conscious awareness of the influence received, even indirectly and in its effects, since in this domain it is not a matter of obtaining an effective spiritual development as a result of the effected transmission; on the other hand, it is an altogether different matter when it is a question of initiation, and hence the interior

1. See *Perspectives on Initiation*, especially chaps. 5 and 8.

work of the initiate, for ultimately the effects of this work should be felt, and this is precisely what constitutes the passage to effective initiation, at whatever degree it may be envisaged. This is at least what ought to take place normally if the initiation is to yield the results rightly expected from it. It is true that in most cases initiation remains forever virtual, which amounts to saying that the above-mentioned effects remain in a latent state indefinitely; but if this is the case, it is nonetheless an anomaly from a strictly initiatic point of view, and due only to certain contingent circumstances,[2] as, for instance, an initiate's insufficient qualifications (that is, the limitation of those possibilities which he bears within himself, and for which nothing external can make up), or again the state of imperfection or degeneration to which certain initiatic organizations are reduced at the present time, and which prevents them from furnishing sufficient support for the attainment of effective initiation, so that even the existence of such an initiation is unsuspected by those who might otherwise be qualified for it, although these organizations do remain capable of conferring a virtual initiation, that is, of assuring the initial transmission of a spiritual influence to those who possess the minimum of the indispensable qualifications.

Incidentally, and before passing to another aspect of the question, we should add that, as we have already expressly noted, this transmission does not and cannot have anything 'magical' about it for the very reason that it is essentially a matter of a spiritual influence, whereas everything of a magical order is concerned exclusively with the manipulation of psychic influences. Even if it happens that the spiritual influence is accompanied secondarily by certain psychic influences, this changes nothing, for it amounts to no more than a purely accidental result, due only to the correspondence that always necessarily obtains between different orders of reality; in all cases, initiatic rites do not act on or by means of these psychic influences, but stem solely from spiritual influences, and precisely insofar as they are initiatic, could not have any raison d'être outside of

2. One could say in a general way moreover that in the conditions of an age like ours it is almost always the truly normal case that from the traditional point of view appears as the exception.

the latter. The same is also true moreover in the exoteric domain concerning religious rites;[3] and regarding these as well as initiatic rites, whatever differences there may be between spiritual influences, either in themselves or with respect to the various ends to which they are directed, it is still properly a matter of spiritual influences. This suffices to show that they have nothing in common with magic, which is only a secondary traditional science of an altogether contingent and even of a very inferior order, and which is, we repeat, entirely foreign to everything that has to do with the spiritual domain.

We now come to what seems the most important point, one that touches most closely on the very root of the question, which, seen from this angle, might be formulated thus: nothing can be separated from the Principle, for if it were it would truly be without existence or reality, even in the smallest degree; how then can one speak of an affiliation, whatever may be the intermediaries by which it is effected, for ultimately this could only be conceived of as a link to the Principle itself, which, to take the word in its literal meaning, seems to imply the reestablishment of a link that had been broken? A question of this type is quite similar to another that has also been asked: Why do we need to make an effort to attain Deliverance, since the 'Self' (*Ātmā*) is immutable and remains always the same, and could not in any way be modified or affected by anything whatsoever? Those who raise such questions show that they have stopped at a much too exclusively theoretical and thereby one-sided view of things, or else that they have confused two points of view which, however, are clearly distinct, although complementary to each other in a certain sense—the principial point of view and that of manifested beings. Assuredly, from the metaphysical point of view one could if need be confine oneself to the principial aspect only and as it were neglect all the rest; but the properly initiatic point of view, on the contrary, must start from conditions that are

3. It goes without saying that the same holds true for exoteric rites in traditions other than those clothed in a religious form; if we speak more particularly of religious rites here, it is because, in this domain, they represent the most generally known case in the West.

those of manifested beings here and now, and more precisely, of human individuals as such, the very conditions, that is, from which it would have them liberate themselves; thus it must necessarily take into consideration—and this is what distinguishes this point of view from that of pure meta-physics—what might be called a 'state of fact', and in some way link it to the principial order. To avoid any ambiguity on this point we should say this: it is evident that in the Principle nothing could ever be subject to change, and so it is not the 'Self' that must be liberated, since it is never 'conditioned' or subject to any limitation, but rather the 'ego', and it can only be liberated by dissipating the illusion that makes it seem separate from the 'Self'. Similarly, it is not really the link with the Principle that must be reestablished, since it always exists and cannot cease to exist,[4] but for the manifested being, it is the effective consciousness of this link that has to be realized; and, in view of the present condition of humanity, there are no other possible means for this than those provided by initiation.

Hence one can understand that the necessity for an initiatic affiliation is not one of principle but only of fact, though one that is nonetheless rigorously indispensable in our present state and which we are consequently obliged to take as a starting-point. Besides, for the men of primordial times initiation would have been useless and even inconceivable, since spiritual development in all its degrees was accomplished among them in an altogether natural and spontaneous way by reason of their proximity to the Principle; but as a result of the 'descent' that has occurred since then, in conformity with the inevitable process of all cosmic manifestation, the conditions of the cyclic period in which we find ourselves at present are altogether different, and this is why the restoration of the possibilities of the primordial state is the first of the goals that initiation sets for itself.[5] It is therefore in taking account of these conditions such as they are

4. This link is basically none other than the *Sūtrātmā* of the Hindu tradition, which we have mentioned in other studies.

5. On initiation considered in connection with the 'lesser mysteries' as enabling the accomplishment of a 're-ascent' of the cycle by successive stages back to the primordial state, cf. *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 40.

in fact that we must affirm the necessity of an initiatic affiliation, and not in a general way and without further qualification as to the conditions of the age or, even more, of the world concerned. In this connection we would call attention more especially to what we have said elsewhere about the possibility that living beings might be born of themselves, without parents;[6] this 'spontaneous generation' is indeed a possibility in principle, and we can very well conceive a world where it would actually be so; but this is not an actual possibility in our world, at least, to be more precise, in its present state. It is the same for the attainment of certain spiritual states, which moreover is also a kind of 'birth',[7] and this comparison seems both the most exact and the best suited to help us understand what is involved. In the same order of ideas, we will also say this: in the present state of our world, the earth is unable to produce a plant of itself and spontaneously, except from a seed deriving necessarily from a pre-existing plant;[8] nevertheless the former case must have obtained at one time, for otherwise there could have been no beginning, although at present this possibility is no longer among those susceptible of manifestation. In the conditions in which we now in fact exist, no one can reap without first having sown, and this is just as true spiritually as it is materially; now, the seed that must be planted in our being in order to make possible our subsequent spiritual development is precisely the influence which, in a state of virtuality and 'envelopment' exactly comparable to that of a plant seed,[9] is communicated to us by initiation.[10]

6. *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 4.

7. In this regard there is hardly need to recall everything we have said elsewhere on initiation considered as a 'second birth'; moreover, this manner of envisaging things is common to all traditional forms without exception.

8. Let us point out, without being able to stress the point just now, that this is not unrelated to the grains of wheat of Eleusis, or, in Masonry, to the password of the grade of Companion; the initiatic application is moreover obviously closely related to the idea of 'spiritual posterity'. In this respect it is perhaps not without interest to note also that the word 'neophyte' means literally 'new plant'.

9. It is not that the spiritual influence in itself can ever be in a state of potentiality, but that the neophyte receives it in a manner somehow proportioned to his own state.

10. We could even add that, by reason of the correspondence that obtains between the cosmic order and the human order, there can be between the two

At this point it will be profitable to point out an error of which several examples have turned up recently: some people believe that affiliation with an initiatic organization is in some way merely a first step 'toward initiation'. This would only be true on condition that we clearly specify that this is the case with effective initiation; but the people in question do not make any distinction between virtual initiation and effective initiation, and perhaps do not even have the faintest notion of such a distinction, which, however, is of the greatest importance and even, one might say, altogether essential; besides, it is quite possible that they have been more or less influenced by certain conceptions of occultist or Theosophist provenance concerning the 'great initiates' and other things of this kind, which are assuredly apt to cause or maintain many confusions. In any case, such people obviously forget that initiation is derived from *initium*, a word that properly means 'entrance' and 'beginning': it is the entrance into a way that will be traversed thereafter, or again the beginning of a new existence in the course of which possibilities of another order will be developed, possibilities beyond the narrow confines of the ordinary life. Understood in its strictest and most precise sense, initiation is in reality nothing other than the initial transmission of a spiritual influence in its seed state, or in other words, initiatic affiliation itself.

Recently, another question concerning initiatic affiliation has been raised, but to correctly assess its scope we should first of all say that it particularly concerns cases where initiation is obtained outside the ordinary and normal channels,[11] and it must be clearly understood above all that such cases are never anything but exceptional, and that they occur when certain circumstances render normal transmission impossible, since their raison d'être is precisely to

terms of comparison that we have just indicated not just a similarity, but a much closer and more direct relationship, of such a nature as to justify it even more completely; and from this we can begin to see that the biblical text in which fallen man is represented as condemned to being no longer able to harvest anything from the soil without hard labor (Gen. 3:17–19) may well correspond to a truth, even in its most literal sense.

11. The explanatory note added to a passage of *Pages dédiées à Mercure d'Abdul-Hâdi* (*Études Traditionnelles*, August 1946, pp318–9) and reproduced in the appendix to the present volume refers to these cases.

substitute in some measure for that transmission. We say 'in some measure' because such a thing can only happen with individuals possessing qualifications far beyond the ordinary and aspirations strong enough to in a way attract to themselves the spiritual influence that they would not find if left to their own devices, and also because for such individuals it is even rarer still—for lack of the assistance provided by constant contact with a traditional organization—that the results obtained through such an initiation are anything but fragmentary and incomplete. This cannot be insisted on too much, and yet to speak of such a possibility is nevertheless perhaps still not entirely without danger, if only because too many people have a tendency to entertain illusions in this regard; let an event occur in their lives that is a little extraordinary—or so it seems to them—but that is really rather commonplace, and they interpret it as a sign that they have received this exceptional initiation; and present-day Westerners in particular are all too easily tempted to seize upon the flimsiest pretext of this kind in order to dispense with a regular affiliation, which is why we are quite justified in insisting that as long as this latter is not in fact impossible to obtain one should not expect to receive any other kind of initiation apart from it.

Another very important point is this: even in such a case, affiliation with an initiatic 'chain' and the transmission of a spiritual influence is always involved, whatever may otherwise be the means and modalities, which no doubt can differ greatly from what they are in normal cases, and may for example imply an activity outside of the ordinary conditions of time and place; but at any rate there is necessarily a real contact, which assuredly has nothing in common with 'visions' or reveries that arise only from the imagination.[12] In certain well-known cases, such as that of Jacob Boehme, to which we have alluded elsewhere,[13] this contact was established by an

12. It should be kept in mind further that when questions of an initiatic order are involved one cannot be too distrustful of the imagination; whatever has to do only with 'psychological' or 'subjective' illusions is completely worthless in this respect, and should not be allowed to intervene in any way or to any degree.

13. *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 10.

encounter with a mysterious personage who did not reappear thereafter; whoever this personage may have been,[14] what we have here is a perfectly 'positive' fact, and not simply a more or less vague and ambiguous 'sign' to be interpreted as one likes. But it is must be understood that an individual initiated by such means may not have any clear awareness of the true nature of what he has received or to what he has thus been affiliated. What is more, lacking 'instructions' that could enable him to gain some idea, however imprecise, on all of this, he himself may be quite incapable of explaining the matter; he may not even have heard of initiation, the word and the thing itself being totally unknown in his milieu, but this is basically of small concern and obviously does not in any way affect the reality of that initiation itself, provided we understand that this kind of initiation presents certain inevitable disadvantages with respect to normal initiation.[15]

Having said this, we now come to the question alluded to previously, for these few remarks enable us to answer it more easily: is it not possible that certain books, of which the contents are of an initiatic order, can, for particularly qualified individuals who study them with the requisite frame of mind, serve by themselves as vehicles for the transmission of a spiritual influence, so that in such an instance their reading would suffice, without there being any need for direct contact with a traditional 'chain', to confer on them an initiation of the type mentioned above? The impossibility of an initiation through books is yet again a point we thought we had sufficiently explained elsewhere, and we must admit that we had not anticipated that the reading of any books whatsoever could be envisaged as constituting one of those exceptional ways that sometimes replace the ordinary means of initiation. Besides, even outside

14. It may have been an instance, though certainly not necessarily so, of the appearance assumed by an 'adept' acting, as we were just saying, outside of the ordinary conditions of time and place. To better understand possibilities of this order, cf. *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 42.

15. Among other consequences, these disadvantages often give the initiate, especially as regards his manner of expression, a certain exterior resemblance to the mystics, which may even cause him to be taken as such by those who do not go to the heart of things, as was precisely the case with Jacob Boehme.

of those particular and special cases where it is properly a matter of the transmission of an initiatic influence, there is here something clearly opposed to the fact that an oral transmission is always and everywhere considered a necessary condition of true traditional teaching, so much so that putting this teaching in writing can never dispense with it;[16] and this because, to be really valid, its transmission implies the communicating of a 'vital' element as it were, for which books could not serve as a vehicle.[17] But what is perhaps most astonishing is that this question was raised in connection with a passage about 'bookish' studies (a passage in which we thought that matters were explained with sufficient clarity to preclude any misunderstanding), where we indicated that precisely those books having an initiatic content were apt to give rise to such misunderstandings;[18] and so it would not seem useless to return to this topic and to explain more completely what we had wanted to say.

It is obvious that there are many different ways of reading one and the same book, and that the results will vary accordingly; in the case of a tradition's sacred scriptures, for example, a person who is profane in the most complete sense of the word, such as the modern 'critic', will view it only as 'literature', from which he will only be able to derive that kind of exclusively verbal knowledge which constitutes pure and simple erudition, without the addition of any real comprehension of even the most exterior kind, since he does not know and does not even ask whether what he is reading is the

16. In a book the content itself, as a body of words and sentences expressing certain ideas, is therefore not the only thing that really matters from the traditional point of view.

17. It might be objected that according to some accounts referring especially to the Rosicrucian tradition, certain books were charged with influences by the authors themselves, which is indeed possible for a book as well as for any other object; but even admitting the reality of this fact, it could in any case only be a question of specific copies especially prepared to that end; moreover, each of these copies would have been destined exclusively for a given disciple, to whom it was directly entrusted, not to take the place of an initiation, which that disciple would have already received, but solely to furnish him with more effective help when, in the course of his personal work, he would use the contents of the book as a support for meditation.

18. *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 34.

expression of a truth; and this is the kind of knowledge that can be qualified as 'bookish' in the strictest sense of the term. Anyone affiliated to the tradition in question, even if he knows only its exoteric side, will already see something altogether different in its scriptures, although his comprehension may still be limited to the literal sense alone; but what he finds there will be incomparably more valuable for him than any erudition, and this remains equally true for those at the lowest level, who, through an incapacity to understand doctrinal truths, regard them simply as rules of conduct which at least enable them to participate in the tradition to the extent of their possibilities. And yet someone like the theologian who aims at assimilating the exoterism of the doctrine as completely as possible and is thus situated at a very much higher level, is still only concerned with the literal sense, and may not even suspect the existence of other more profound meanings—in short, those of esoterism—whereas on the contrary someone having no more than a theoretical grasp of esoterism will, with the help of certain commentaries or otherwise, be able to begin to perceive the plurality of meanings contained in the sacred texts, and hence be in a position to discern the 'spirit' hidden beneath the 'letter'; his comprehension therefore will be of a much more profound and lofty order than that which is aspired to by the most learned and accomplished of the exoterists. The study of such texts can then form an important part of the doctrinal preparation that normally must precede all realization; but if the one devoting himself to this does not also receive an initiation, he will always be left with an exclusively theoretical knowledge, no matter what predisposition he brings to it, which no amount of study will of itself enable him to surpass.

If instead of the sacred scriptures we consider certain writings of a properly initiatic character, as for example those of Shankarāchārya or Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, we could, except on one point, say almost exactly the same thing, and so, to take one instance, the only gain that an orientalist could derive from reading them would be to know that such an author (indeed, they are for him 'authors' and nothing more) has said such or such a thing; furthermore if he wishes to express this material in his own words rather than resting content to repeat it verbatim by a simple act of

memory, there is the greatest risk that he will deform it, since he has not assimilated its real meaning to any degree. This only differs from what we mentioned earlier in that there is no longer any reason to consider the case of the exoterist since these writings relate to the esoteric domain alone and as such are entirely beyond his competence; were he truly able to understand them, he would by that very fact already have crossed the boundary separating exoterism from esoterism, and then we would in fact be in the presence of a 'theoretical' esoterist, of whom we could only repeat unaltered what we have already said on this subject.

Nothing remains now but to focus on one last difference, which however is not the least important from our present point of view: this is the difference between the reading of one and the same book by both the 'theoretical' esoterist just mentioned (who, we will suppose, has not yet received any initiation) and by someone who already possesses an initiatic affiliation. The latter will naturally see in it things of the same order as the former, though perhaps more completely, and above all they will appear to him in a different light as it were; moreover, it goes without saying that as long as his is only a virtual initiation, he can do no more than simply pursue, to a more profound degree, a doctrinal preparation that had remained incomplete until then; but it is altogether different once he enters into the way of realization. For him the content of the book is then properly no more than a support for meditation, in the sense one might call 'ritual', and in exactly the same way as the various kinds of symbols he uses to assist and sustain his inner work; surely it would be inconceivable for traditional writings, which by their very nature are necessarily symbolic in the strictest sense of this term, not to play such a role as well. Beyond the 'letter', which has now as it were disappeared for him, he will truly see nothing but the 'spirit', and thus possibilities altogether different from those inherent in a simple theoretical understanding will be as open to him as when he meditates by concentrating on a *mantra* or a ritual *yantra*. But if this is so, it is only, we repeat, by virtue of the initiation received, which constitutes the necessary condition without which, whatever qualifications an individual might otherwise possess, there cannot be the slightest beginning of realization—which in short amounts simply

to saying that every effective initiation necessarily presupposes a virtual initiation. And we can add further that if it happens that someone meditating on an initiatic piece of writing really enters into contact by its means with an influence emanating from the author thereof (which is in fact possible if the writing originates in a traditional form, and especially from the particular 'chain' to which he himself is attached), this too, far from taking the place of an initiatic affiliation, can on the contrary never be anything but a consequence of a prior affiliation. However we look at it then, there can be absolutely no initiation through books, but only, under certain circumstances, an initiatic use of books, which is obviously something altogether different. We hope that this time we have sufficiently stressed this point so that not even the slightest ambiguity remains, and that no one will continue to think that there might be something here which lends itself, even if only under exceptional circumstances, to dispensing with the need for an initiatic affiliation.

7

THE NECESSITY OF TRADITIONAL EXOTERISM

MANY PEOPLE SEEM to doubt whether it is really necessary for one who aspires to initiation to attach himself first of all to a traditional form of the exoteric order and fulfill all its prescriptions; moreover, this is indicative of a state of mind peculiar to the modern West, for reasons that are no doubt numerous. We will not undertake to ascertain how much of the responsibility for this lies with the very representatives of religious exoterism, whose exclusivism too often tends to deny more or less expressly all that passes beyond their domain; but this aspect of the question is not what interests us here, for what is more astonishing is that those who consider themselves qualified for initiation should display a basically equivalent incomprehension, although here it is applied in an inverse manner. It is indeed admissible that an exoterist be ignorant of esoterism, although such ignorance does not of course justify a negation of it, but what is inadmissible is that anyone with pretensions to esoterism should ignore exoterism, even if only in a practical way, for the 'greater' must necessarily comprehend the 'lesser'. Besides, this practical ignorance, consisting as it does of regarding participation in an exoteric tradition as useless or superfluous, would not be possible without a theoretical misunderstanding of this aspect of tradition; and it is this misunderstanding that makes the matter all the more serious, for it can be asked whether someone with such a misunderstanding, whatever his other possibilities may be, is really prepared to approach the initiatic and esoteric domain, and whether he

ought not rather apply himself to better understanding the value and scope of exoterism before seeking to go further. In fact, there is manifest here an enfeeblement of the tra-ditional spirit understood in its general sense, and it should be obvious that it is this spirit that one must first integrally restore in oneself if one wishes thereafter to penetrate the profound meaning of tradition; the misunderstanding in question is fundamentally of the same order as that concerning the efficacy proper to rites, which is also so widespread in the contemporary West. We readily admit that the profane ambience in which many live renders the comprehension of these things more difficult; but it is precisely against the influence of this ambience that they must react in every regard, until they have succeeded in realizing the illegitimacy of the profane point of view itself—a matter to which we shall shortly return.

We have said that the state of mind we are denouncing here is peculiar to the West. Indeed, it could not exist in the East, first because of the persistence of the traditional spirit there, which still penetrates the entire social milieu,[1] and then also because where exoterism and esoterism are directly linked in the constitution of a traditional form[2] in such a way as to be as it were the two faces, exterior and interior, of one and the same thing, it is immediately comprehensible to everyone that one must first adhere to the exterior in order subsequently to be able to penetrate to the interior,[3] and that there can be no other way than this. This may appear less evident in the case—which actually occurs in the contemporary West—where one finds oneself in the presence of initiatic organizations with no

1. We speak here of the milieu taken as a whole and so need not take into account 'modernized'—or 'Westernized'—elements, which, however clamorous they may be, constitute in spite of everything only a small minority.

2. For ease of expression we use the two terms 'exoterism' and 'esoterism' in their widest sense and for ease of expression, which should cause no inconvenience, for it goes without saying that, even in a tradition where such a division is not formally established, there is necessarily always something that corresponds to both two points of view; in the present case, moreover, the link between them is all the more evident.

3. One can also say, according to a frequently employed symbolism, that the kernel can only be reached by way of the shell.

link to the whole of a definite traditional form; but then we can say that, in principle at least, they are by this very fact compatible with every exoterism, whatever it may be, although from the strictly initiatic point of view, which alone concerns us here to the exclusion of a consideration of contingent circumstances, these initiatic organizations are not really compatible with the absence of any traditional exoterism.

In order to explain things in the simplest way possible let us say first that one does not build upon the void, and wholly profane existence, that is, existence from which all traditional elements are excluded, is in this respect really only void and nothingness. If one wishes to construct a building one must first lay down the foundation, which provides the indispensable base upon which the whole edifice, including its loftiest parts, will rest—and this foundation remains, even when the building is completed. In the same way, adherence to an exoterism is a preliminary condition for coming to esoterism and furthermore one must not believe that this exoterism can be rejected once initiation has been obtained, any more than the foundation can be removed once the building has been constructed. Exoterism, far from being rejected, must in reality be 'transformed' in the measure corresponding to the degree attained by the initiate, for he becomes more and more qualified to understand the profound reasons for it; and as a result the doctrinal formulas and rites take on for him a significance much more genuinely important than they could have for the mere exoterist who in the end is by definition always restricted to the exterior appearance alone, that is, to what counts least with regard to the 'truth' of the tradition envisaged in its integrality.

Then also—and this brings us back to a consideration we alluded to above—whoever does not take part in any traditional exoterism by this very fact gives the purely profane outlook the greatest conceivable scope in his own individual existence; and in these conditions he must necessarily conform all his exterior activity to this outlook. At another level and with wider consequences this is the same error as that committed by the majority of those modern Westerners who believe themselves still 'religious' but make of religion something entirely apart, having no real contact with the rest

of their lives. Such an error is moreover all the less excusable for one who wishes to place himself at the initiatic point of view than for one who keeps to the exoteric perspective; and in any case it is easily seen how far this is from corresponding to an integrally traditional conception. Basically, this amounts to admitting that outside or alongside the traditional domain there is a profane domain that is equally legitimate in its own order. Now, as we have often said before, there is really no profane realm to which some things belong by their very nature; there is only a profane point of view, which is merely the product of the spiritual degeneration of humanity, and which consequently is entirely illegitimate. In principle, then, one ought to make no concession to this point of view, but in the present Western environment this is assuredly very difficult to do in fact—and perhaps even impossible in certain cases and up to a certain point—for apart from very rare exceptions each individual is obliged by the necessity for social relationships to submit himself more or less to the conditions of 'ordinary' life, at least in appearance, which precisely is nothing other than the practical application of this profane point of view. But even if such concessions are indispensable in order to live in this environment, they should nevertheless be kept to a strict minimum by all those for whom tradition still has meaning, whereas they are on the contrary pushed to the utmost by those who claim to dispense with all exoterism, even if this is not their intention and even if they are only more or less unconsciously coming under the influence of the profane milieu. Such dispositions are certainly as unfavorable as can be to initiation, which has to do with a domain that exterior influences must normally not penetrate in any way. If, however, because of the anomalies inherent to the conditions of our age, those harboring this attitude are nonetheless able to receive a virtual initiation, we strongly doubt that it will be possible for them to go further and proceed to effective initiation so long as they voluntarily persist in this orientation.

8

SALVATION AND DELIVERANCE

We recently observed, not without some astonishment, that some of our readers still experience difficulty in understanding the essential difference between salvation and Deliverance. We have however already explained our position on this question many times, and in any case this ought to pose no problem for anyone possessing the idea of the multiple states of the being and, above all, that of the fundamental distinction between the 'ego' and the 'Self'.[1] It is therefore necessary to return to the subject in order to dispel definitively any possible misunderstanding and to leave no room for any objection.

In the present conditions of terrestrial humanity, it is evident that the great majority of men are wholly incapable of going beyond the

1. Another thing that, in truth, is much less surprising to us is the obstinate incomprehension of the orientalists in this regard, as in so many others. We recently saw a rather curious example of it: in a review of *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedânta*, one of them, noting with ill disguised bad humor our criticisms of his colleagues, mentions as something particularly shocking what we said about the 'constant confusion between salvation and Deliverance', and he appears indignant that we faulted a certain Indianist for having translated *Moksha* by 'salvation' from one end of his works to the other, without seeming even to suspect the mere possibility of an inexactness in this assimilation. Obviously it is wholly inconceivable to him that *Moksha* could be anything other than salvation! This aside, what is truly amusing is that the author of this review 'deplores' the fact that we have not adopted the orientalists' transcription, even though we expressly stated our reasons for this, and also that we did not include a bibliography of works by orientalists, as if they ought to have been 'authorities' for us and as if, from our point of view, we did not have the right purely and simply to ignore them. Such remarks give the correct measure of the comprehension of certain people.

limits of the individual condition, either during their lives or after leaving this world by bodily death, which in itself can change nothing about the spiritual level they possess at the moment it occurs.[2] Since this is so, exoterism in its broadest sense, that is to say the part of tradition addressed indiscriminately to all, can only offer them an end of a purely individual order, since any other would be entirely inaccessible to most of the adherents of the tradition, and it is precisely this end that constitutes salvation. It goes without saying that it is a long way from here to effective realization of a supra-individual though still conditioned state, not to mention Deliverance, which, as the achievement of the supreme and unconditioned state, truly has no common measure with any conditioned state whatsoever.[3] We will immediately add that if 'Paradise is a prison' for some, as we said earlier, this is precisely because the being that finds itself in the state to which this corresponds—that is, the being that has attained salvation—is still locked, even for an indefinite duration, in the limitations that define human individuality. This condition can only be a state of 'privation' for those who aspire to be freed from these limitations and whose degree of spiritual development renders them effectively capable of it even during their terrestrial life, although the others who do not themselves possess the possibility of going further can in no way feel this 'privation' as such.

One can thus ask the following question: even if the beings in this state are not conscious of its imperfection with respect to higher states, this imperfection nonetheless exist in reality; what advantage is there then in keeping these beings indefinitely in this state, since it

2. Many people seem to imagine that the sole fact of death can suffice to give a man intellectual or spiritual qualities that he never possessed while alive. This is a strange illusion, and we do not see what reasons could be invoked to give it the least appearance of justification.

3. Incidentally, we will explain that if we are accustomed to begin 'salvation' in the lower case and 'Deliverance' with a capital, this is to mark clearly that one is of the individual order and the other of a transcendent order, just as when we write 'ego' and 'Self'. This remark is meant to prevent anyone attributing to us intentions that are in no way ours, such as depreciating salvation in some way, when it is solely a matter of situating it as exactly as possible in the place that in fact belongs to it in total reality.

is the normal result of exoteric traditional observances? The truth is that there is a very great one, for being fixed thereby in the prolongations of the human state as long as this state itself subsists in manifestation—which is equivalent to perpetuity or an indefinite time—these beings will not be able to pass on to another individual state, which otherwise would necessarily be the only possibility open to them. But once again, why in this case is the continuation of the human state more favorable than the passage to another state? Here we must interpose a consideration of the central position occupied by man in the degree of existence to which he belongs, while all other beings in this state are more or less peripheral, their specific superiority or inferiority in relation to one another resulting directly from their greater or lesser distance from the center; and this determines the different measures of their participation, which is always only partial, in the possibilities that can only be expressed completely in and by man. But, when a being must pass to another individual state, nothing guarantees that there it will again occupy a central position relative to the possibilities of that state, as it does in its present state; on the contrary, there is even an incomparably greater probability that it will encounter one of the innumerable peripheral conditions comparable in our world to those of animals or even vegetables. One can immediately understand how serious a disadvantage this would be, especially from the point of view of the possibilities for spiritual development, even if, as would be normal to suppose, this new state envisaged in its entirety constituted a degree of existence higher than ours. This is why certain oriental texts say that 'human birth is difficult to obtain,' which of course applies equally to what corresponds to it in every other individual state; and this is also the reason why exoteric doctrines portray the 'second death' as a formidable and even sinister eventuality, this death being the dissolution of the psychic elements by which the being ceases to belong to the human state and thereby must necessarily and immediately be born into another state. It would be wholly different and even quite the contrary if this 'second death' gave access to a supra-individual state; but this is no longer the province of exoterism, which can and must consider only the most general case, while the exceptions are precisely what constitute the

raison d'être of esoterism. Ordinary man, who cannot attain a supra-individual state, can if he attains salvation at least reach the end of the human cycle; he will thus escape the danger we have just mentioned and so will not lose the benefit of his human birth; on the contrary, he will preserve it in a definitive way, for to say salvation is to say preservation, and it is this that is of essential importance in such a case, for it is in this, but only in this, that salvation can be considered to bring the being closer to his ultimate destination, or, as improper as such a manner of speaking may be, to constitute in a certain sense progress toward Deliverance.

Moreover, one must take great care not to be led into error through certain apparent similarities of expression, for the same terms can have many meanings and be applied at very different levels according to whether it is a question of the exoteric or esoteric domain. Thus, when the mystics speak of 'union with God', what they mean by this can certainly not be assimilated in any way to *Yoga*; and this remark is particularly important because some people might perhaps be tempted to say: how can a being have a higher end than union with God? All depends on the sense in which one takes the word 'union'. In reality, the mystics, like all other exoterists, are concerned with nothing more or other than salvation, although what they have in view is, if one wishes, a higher modality of salvation, for it is inconceivable that there should not also be a hierarchy among 'saved' beings. In any case, since in mystical union individuality as such subsists, it can only be a wholly exterior and relative union, and it is quite evident that the mystics have never even conceived the possibility of the Supreme Identity; they stop short at 'vision', and the entire extent of the angelic worlds still separates them from Deliverance.

9

RITUAL AND MORAL POINTS OF VIEW

As we have remarked on various occasions, similar phenomena can proceed from entirely different causes. This is why phenomena in themselves, which are only outward appearances, can never really constitute proof of the truth of any doctrine or theory, contrary to the illusions of modern 'experimentalism' in this regard. The same is true of human actions, which moreover are also phenomena of a kind: the same actions, or to speak more exactly, actions that are outwardly indistinguishable from one another, can relate to very different intentions among those who perform them; and more generally, two individuals can even act in similar ways throughout almost all the circumstances of their lives even though the points of view that regulate their conduct in reality have almost nothing in common. Naturally, a superficial observer who limits himself to what he sees and who goes no further than appearances will never fail to let himself be deceived in this regard and will uniformly interpret the actions of all men in relation to his own point of view. It is easy to understand that this can be the cause of many errors, as in the case of men belonging to different civilizations for example, or with historical facts dating from distant ages. A very striking and as it were extreme example of this is provided us by those of our contemporaries who, because 'economic' considerations in fact play a preponderant role for themselves, seek to explain all of human history by appealing exclusively to matters of this order, without even thinking to ask whether this has been true in all times and places. This is an effect of the tendency, also to be observed among psychologists, to believe that men are always and

everywhere the same, a tendency perhaps natural in a certain sense, but nonetheless unjustified, and we think one of which we cannot be too mistrustful.

There is another error of the same kind that risks, even more easily than the one we have just described, escaping the notice of many people and indeed of the great majority, because they are too accustomed to envisaging things in this manner, and also because, unlike the 'economic' illusion, it does not seem to be directly linked to any particular theories. This error consists in attributing the specifically moral point of view to all men without distinction, that is, in translating into 'moral' terms, with the special intentions these imply, every rule of action whatsoever, even when it belongs to civilizations completely different from theirs in every respect, simply because it is from this point of view that modern Westerners derive their own rule of action. Those who think in this way seem incapable of understanding that there are indeed other points of view that also can furnish such rules, and that, as we were just saying, the outward similarities that may exist in men's conduct in no way proves that it is always governed by the same point of view. Thus the precept to do or not to do something, which some may obey for reasons of the moral order, can be observed equally by others for wholly different reasons. It must not be concluded from this that in themselves and independently of their practical consequences, the viewpoints in question are all equivalent, far from it, for what could be called the 'quality' of the corresponding intentions varies to such a degree that there is, so to speak, no common measure between them; and this is more particularly true when comparing the moral point of view to the ritual point of view that belongs to integrally traditional civilizations.

According to the original meaning of the word itself, and as we have explained elsewhere, ritual action is what is accomplished 'in conformity with order'. It consequently implies an effective consciousness of this conformity, at least to some degree; and where tradition has not undergone any diminishment, every action whatsoever has a properly ritual character. It is important to note that this essentially presupposes the knowledge of the solidarity and correspondence that exist between the cosmic order and the human

order; this knowledge, with the multiple applications deriving from it, exists in all traditions, whereas it has become completely foreign to the modern mentality, which sees nothing but fantastic 'speculations' in everything that does not fall within its crude and narrowly limited conception of what it calls 'reality'. For anyone not blinded by prejudice, it is easy to see the distance separating a consciousness of conformity with the universal order, and the participation of the individual in this order by virtue of that very conformity, from the mere 'moral conscience' that requires no intellectual comprehension and is guided by nothing except purely sentimental aspirations and tendencies, and what a profound degeneration in the general mentality of humanity is implied by the passage from the one to the other. Moreover, it goes without saying that this passage is not accomplished all at once and that there can be many intermediate degrees where the two corresponding points of view intermingle in different proportions. In fact, the ritual point of view always exists in every traditional form of necessity, but some traditional forms, such as those that are properly religious, give a greater or lesser part to the moral perspective alongside the ritual point of view, and we shall see the reason for this shortly. However this may be, once one finds oneself in the presence of the moral point of view in a civilization, one can say that it is no longer integrally traditional, whatever the appearances in other respects; or in other words, the appearance of this viewpoint can be considered to be linked in some way to that of the profane point of view.

This is not the place to examine the stages of this degeneration which leads finally to the modern world, to the complete disappearance of the traditional spirit, and thus to the invasion by the profane outlook of all domains without exception; we will only note that in the present order of things it is this last stage that is represented by the so-called 'independent' ethics which, whether they call themselves 'philosophical' or 'scientific' are really only a degeneration of religious ethics, that is to say, they are to this latter much as the profane sciences are to the traditional sciences. Naturally there are also corresponding degrees in the incomprehension of traditional realities and in the errors of interpretation to which they give rise; in this regard the lowest degree is held by the modern conceptions which,

no longer content even to see in ritual prescriptions only ethical rules, and thus already misunderstanding their profound reason, go so far as to attribute to them vulgar preoccupations with hygiene or cleanliness; it is obvious indeed that, after this, incomprehension could hardly be pushed further!

There is another question that is more important for us at present: how could authentic traditional forms have conceded a place to the moral perspective, as we were just saying, even incorporating it as one of their constituent elements, instead of remaining at the pure ritual point of view? It was inevitable that this happen once the human mentality as a whole fell to a lower level in the descending course of the historical cycle; in order to direct men's actions efficaciously it is necessary to have recourse to means appropriate to their nature, and when this nature is mediocre, the means must also be so in a corresponding degree, for this is the only way to save those who can still be saved in such conditions. Once the majority of men are no longer capable of understanding the reasons for ritual action as such, in order that they should nonetheless continue to act in a still normal and 'regular' fashion, it is necessary to appeal to secondary motives, ethical or otherwise, but in any case of a much more relative and contingent—and, we might add, thereby lower—order than those inherent in the ritual point of view. In this there is really no deviation but only a necessary adaptation; the particular traditional forms must be adapted to the circumstances of time and place that determine the mentality of those to which they are addressed, since it is this that is the very reason for their diversity, especially regarding their most outward aspect which must be common to all without exception, and to which all rules of action naturally relate. As for those still capable of another order of comprehension, it is obviously their responsibility to effect the transposition by placing themselves at a higher and more profound point of view which always remains possible as long as the link with principles has not been broken, that is to say, as long as the traditional point of view itself continues to subsist; thus they need only consider ethics as a mere outward mode of expression that does not affect the very essence of things clothed by it. Thus, for example, there is surely as great a difference as possible between one who

accomplishes actions for ethical reasons and one who accomplishes them in view of an effective spiritual development to which they can serve as preparation; their mode of acting is nonetheless the same, but their intentions are wholly different and in no way correspond to the same degree of comprehension. But it is only when morality has lost all traditional character that one can truly speak of deviation; emptied of all real meaning and no longer possessing anything that could legitimize its existence, this profane ethics is properly speaking nothing more than a 'residue' without value and a pure and simple superstition.

10

THE 'GLORIFICATION OF WORK'

IN OUR TIME it is fashionable to exalt work of whatever sort and no matter how it is accomplished, as if it had some superlative value in itself independently of any consideration of another order. This has been the subject of innumerable pronouncements as empty as they are pompous, not only in the profane world but, what is more serious, even in the initiatic organizations remaining in the West.[1] It is easy to understand that this way of envisaging things is directly linked to the exaggerated need for action that characterizes modern Westerners; work, at least when so considered, is obviously nothing but a form of action, and a form to which the 'moralist' prejudice is bound to attribute more importance than to any other because it more easily lends itself to being presented as a 'duty' for man and as ensuring his 'dignity'.[2] Added to this there is usually a clearly anti-traditional motive, namely the depreciation of contemplation, which is assimilated to idleness, whereas on the contrary it is really the highest activity conceivable, and whereas further, action separated from contemplation can only be blind and disordered.[3] All of

1. In Masonry the 'glorification of work' is notably the theme of the final part of initiation to the grade of Companion; and unfortunately, it is today generally understood in this wholly profane manner instead of being understood, as it ought to be, in the legitimate and truly traditional sense that we propose to describe in what follows.

2. Let us immediately say that between this modern conception of work and its traditional conception there is all the difference which exists in a general way between the moral viewpoint and the ritual viewpoint, as we explained above.

3. Here let us recall one of the applications of the fable of the blind man and the

this only too easily accounts for those who declare, no doubt sincerely, that 'their happiness lies in action' itself;[4] we would rather say in 'agitation', for once action is thus taken for an end in itself, whatever the 'moralist' pretexts invoked to justify it, it is truly nothing more than that.

Contrary to what the moderns think, any work that is done indiscriminately by anyone solely for the pleasure of acting or because of the need to 'earn one's living' hardly merits being exalted, and indeed it can only be regarded as something abnormal, opposed to the order that ought to regulate human institutions, to such a point that, in the conditions of our age, it only too often acquires a character that without any exaggeration qualifies as 'infra-human'. What our contemporaries seem to ignore completely is that work is not truly valid unless it conforms to the very nature of the being that accomplishes it and results therefrom in a spontaneous and necessary way, as it were, so that it is no more than the means for that nature to realize itself as perfectly as possible. This in sum is the very notion of *svadharma*, which is the true foundation of the caste system and which we have emphasized sufficiently on many other occasions, so that here we can content ourselves by recalling it without further discussion. In this connection one can also consider what Aristotle said about the accomplishment by each being of its 'proper activity', by which must be understood both the exercise of an activity in conformity to its nature and, as an immediate consequence of this activity, the passage from 'potency' to 'act' of the possibilities comprised in this nature. In other words, in order for work of any sort to be what it ought to be, it must above all correspond to a person's 'vocation' in the proper meaning of this word;[5] and when

paralytic, who represent respectively the active life and the contemplative life (cf. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, chap. 5).

4. We take this phrase from a commentary on Masonic ritual, which nonetheless is in many ways certainly not the worst, that is, not one most affected by infiltrations of the profane spirit.

5. On this point as on the other considerations that follow, we will refer to the numerous studies that A.K. Coomaraswamy devoted particularly to these questions for fuller explanations.

things are thus, the material profit that can legitimately be derived from it is only a wholly secondary and contingent, not to say negligible end compared to the higher end, which is the development and as it were the fulfillment 'in act' of the very nature of the human being.

It goes without saying that what we have just said constitutes one of the essential foundations of any craft initiation, for the corresponding 'vocation' is one of the requisite qualifications for such an initiation and is even, one might say, the first and most indispensable.[6] There is nonetheless one other thing that needs to be emphasized, particularly from the initiatic point of view, for it gives to work in its traditional understanding its deepest meaning and highest importance, going beyond a consideration of human nature alone to link it with the cosmic order itself, and through this, in the most direct way, to universal principles. In order to understand this, one can begin with the definition of art as the 'imitation of nature in its mode of operation,'[7] that is to say nature as cause (*Natura naturans*), and not as effect (*Natura naturata*). From the traditional point of view there is no distinction between art and craft, any more than between artist and artisan, and this also is a point that we have already had occasion to explain. All that is produced 'in conformity with order' thereby equally and by the same right merits consideration as a work of art.[8] All traditions insist on the analogy between human artisans and the divine Artisan, both operating 'by a word conceived in the intellect,' which, let us note in passing, marks as clearly as possible the role of contemplation as the preliminary and necessary condition to the production of any work of art; and this too is an essential difference from the profane conception of work, which, as we said above, reduces it purely and simply to action, and

6. Certain modern occupations, especially those that are purely mechanical and for which there cannot really be any question of 'vocation', and which consequently have in themselves an 'abnormal' character, cannot validly be the occasion for any initiation.

7. And not in its productions, as the partisans of a so-called 'realist' art imagine, which art is more exactly called 'naturalistic'.

8. It is hardly necessary to recall that this traditional notion of art has absolutely nothing in common with the 'esthetic' theories of the moderns.

which even tries to oppose it to contemplation. According to the Hindu scriptures, 'we must build as the *Devas* did in the beginning'; this, which naturally extends to the exercise of all crafts worthy of the name, implies that work has a properly ritual character, as moreover all things ought to have in a civilization that is integrally traditional; and this ritual character not only ensures that 'conformity to order' of which we have just spoken, but one can even say that it is truly one with this conformity itself.[9]

When the human artist thus imitates the operation of the divine Artist in his own particular domain, he participates to a corresponding measure in the very work of the divine Artist, and in a way that is all the more effective as he is the more conscious of that operation; and the more he realizes through his work the virtualities of his own nature, at the same time the more his resemblance to the divine Artist increases, and the more perfectly his works are integrated into the harmony of the Cosmos. One can see how far this is from the banalities our contemporaries are in the habit of pronouncing in the belief that they are praising work; but when work is all that it traditionally ought to be, and only then, it is in reality far above all that they are capable of conceiving. Thus we can conclude these few remarks, which could easily be developed almost indefinitely, by saying this: the 'glorification of work' indeed corresponds to a truth, and even to a profound truth; but the way in which modern people understand it is nothing but a deformed caricature and in a way even an inversion of the traditional notion. Work is not 'glorified' by vain discourse, something which does not even have a plausible meaning; but work itself is 'glorified', that is to say 'transformed', when, instead of being a mere profane activity, it constitutes a conscious and effective collaboration toward the realization of the plan of the 'Great Architect of the Universe'.

9. For all of this, see A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Is Art a Superstition or a Way of Life?' in the collection entitled *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*

11

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

WE HAVE OFTEN EXPLAINED that in an integrally traditional civilization every human activity, whatever it may be, possesses a sacred character, for by very definition tradition leaves nothing outside of itself; its applications thus extend to all things without exception in such a way that nothing can be considered indifferent or insignificant in regard to it, and such that whatever a man does, his participation in the tradition is constantly assured by his very actions. As soon as certain things are excluded from the traditional point of view or, what amounts to the same thing, are regarded as profane, this is a manifest sign that there has already been a degeneration entailing a weakening and attenuation of a tradition; in human history such a degeneration is naturally linked with the descending course of cyclic unfolding. Obviously there can be many different degrees, but, as a general rule, it can be said that today, even in civilizations that previously maintained the most clearly traditional character, a certain portion of daily life is always given over to the profane as a kind of forced concession to a mentality determined by the very conditions of the age. This is not to say however that a tradition can ever recognize the profane point of view as legitimate, since this would be tantamount to denying itself, at least partially and to the degree of latitude accorded to that point of view. Through all of its successive adaptations, tradition can only maintain in principle, if not in fact, that its own point of view is really valid for all things and includes them all equally.

Owing to its essentially anti-traditional spirit, modern Western civilization is unique in affirming the legitimacy of the profane as

such and even in considering it 'progress' to include in it an ever-increasing portion of human activity. Indeed, this is so true that for the wholly modern spirit nothing exists but the profane, and all of its efforts ultimately tend finally to the negation or exclusion of the sacred. The relationships are here reversed: even an attenuated traditional civilization can only tolerate the existence of the profane point of view as an unavoidable evil, and endeavor to limit its consequences as much as possible; in modern civilization, on the contrary, it is the sacred that is tolerated, and only because it cannot destroy it at a single blow. While waiting for the complete realization of this 'ideal', it grants it a smaller and smaller role, taking the greatest care to isolate all the rest behind an impenetrable barrier.

The passage from one to another of these opposed attitudes implies the conviction that there is not only a profane point of view, but a profane domain, that is, that there are things that are profane in and of themselves, and according to their very nature, and not, as in reality, as a result of a certain mentality. This affirmation of a profane domain, which unjustifiably changes a simple state of fact into a state of law, is one of the fundamental postulates of the anti-traditional spirit, for it is only by first inculcating this false conception into the minds of the generality of men that it can hope gradually to achieve its goal, that is, the disappearance of the sacred, or in other terms, the eradication of tradition, even to its last vestiges. One need only look around to realize how far the modern spirit has succeeded in its self-appointed task. Even men who esteem themselves 'religious', that is, those in whom there still subsists more or less consciously something of the traditional spirit, only consider religion as occupying a place wholly apart among other things, indeed, a place so restricted that it exerts no effective influence on the rest of their lives, where they think and act exactly as the most completely irreligious of their contemporaries. What is most serious is that these men do not simply act this way because they feel obliged to do so by the constraints of the milieu in which they live, because they are in a situation that they can only deplore and from which they are unable to escape. Were this the case it would be admissible, for assuredly one cannot demand of everyone the courage necessary to react openly against the dominant tendencies of the age, which to be sure

is not without danger in many respects. But, so far from this being the case, these men are affected by the modern spirit to such a point that like everyone else they regard the distinction and even the separation of the sacred from the profane as perfectly legitimate, and see in the traditional and normal structures of civilization nothing but a confusion of two different domains, a confusion that has been 'surpassed' and advantageously done away with by 'progress'!

There is still more. Such an attitude, barely conceivable on the part of men who call and believe themselves religious, is no longer only the attitude of the 'laity', for whom it could be attributed to a certain, partially excusable, ignorance; but this same attitude now appears to belong to an ever-growing number of the clergy, who do not seem to understand how contrary it is to tradition, and here we mean tradition as such, thus the one they represent as well as every other traditional form. And it has been pointed out to us that some go so far as to reproach the Eastern civilizations for having a social life still penetrated by the spiritual, seeing this as one of the principal causes of their supposed inferiority to Western civilization! Furthermore, we notice a strange contradiction here: the clergy with the most modern tendencies show themselves more preoccupied with social action than with doctrine; however, since they accept and even approve the 'laicization' of society, why do they intervene in that domain? It cannot be a legitimate and desirable attempt to reintroduce some modicum of the traditional spirit into it, since they believe this spirit should remain completely foreign to the activities of the social' order. This intervention is thus completely incomprehensible, unless we admit that there is something profoundly illogical in their mentality, as is undeniably the case with many of our contemporaries. Be that as it may, we have here a most disquieting symptom. When the authentic representatives of a tradition reach the point where their way of thinking does not differ appreciably from that of their adversaries, we are forced to wonder what degree of vitality remains in this tradition in its present state, and since it is a question of the tradition of the Western world, what are its chances for rectification under these conditions, at least if we confine ourselves to the exoteric domain and do not envisage any other order of possibilities?

12

CONVERSIONS

THE WORD 'CONVERSION' can be taken in two totally different senses. Its original meaning corresponds to the Greek term *metanoia*, which properly expresses a change of *nous*, or, as A.K. Coomaraswamy has said, an 'intellectual metamorphosis'. This interior transformation, indicated moreover by the Latin etymology (*cum-vertere*), simultaneously implies both a 'gathering' or concentration of the powers of the being, and a certain 'return' by which the being passes from 'human thought' to 'divine comprehension'. *Metanoia* or 'conversion' is therefore the conscious passage of the ordinary and individual mind, normally turned toward sensible things, to its superior transposition, where it is identified with the *hēgemōn* of Plato or the *antaryāmī* of the Hindu tradition. It is obvious that this passage is a necessary phase in every process of spiritual development. It must be understood that this development is of a purely interior order, having absolutely nothing in common with any kind of exterior and contingent change, whether arising simply from the 'moral' domain, as is too often believed today (*metanoia* is even translated as 'repentance'), or from the religious and more generally exoteric domain.[1]

After the above explanations, and in order to avoid any confusion, we must now take up the common meaning of the word 'conversion', the meaning it bears constantly in contemporary language, where it designates only the exterior passage from one traditional form to another, whatever the reasons that determined the change, reasons usually completely contingent, sometimes lacking any real

1. On this subject, see A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'On Being in One's Right Mind' in *What is Civilization?* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1989).

importance, and in any case having nothing to do with pure spirituality. Although without doubt more or less spontaneous conversions can sometimes occur, at least in appearance, they usually result from religious 'proselytism', and it goes without saying that all the objections which can be formulated against the value of this 'proselytism' apply equally to its results. In short, both the 'convertor' and the 'convertee' show the same incomprehension of the profound meaning of their traditions, and their respective attitudes show only too manifestly that their intellectual horizon is likewise limited to the viewpoint of the most exclusive exoterism.[2] Even aside from this reason of principle, but for others reasons too, we have little regard for 'converts' in general, not that their sincerity should be doubted *a priori* (for here we do not consider the all too frequent case of those motivated by some base material or sentimental interest, who really should be called 'pseudo-converts'), but first because they give proof at the very least of a rather unfortunate lack of mental stability, and then because they almost always have a tendency to the narrowest and most exaggerated 'sectarianism', either because of their own temperament, which has driven some to pass from one extreme to another with disconcerting ease, or simply as a means of deflecting the suspicions they fear in their new milieu. Basically, 'converts' are of little interest, at least for those who look at things without any prejudice of exoteric exclusiveness and have no taste for the study of various 'psychological' curiosities. For our part, we certainly prefer not to examine them too closely.

Having said this, we must turn to a point that we have been especially wanting to discuss. People often speak of 'conversions' very inappropriately and in cases where this word, understood in the sense just given above, could never be applied, that is, the case of those who, for reasons of an esoteric and initiatic order, adopt a traditional form different from that to which they would seem to be linked by their origin. This could be either because their native tradition furnished them with no possibility of an esoteric order, or

2. In principle, there is only one really legitimate conversion, the one that consists in the connection to a tradition, whatever it may be, on the part of someone who was previously lacking any traditional attachment.

simply because their chosen tradition, even in its exoteric form, gives them a foundation that is more appropriate to their nature, and consequently more favorable to their spiritual work. Whoever places himself at the esoteric point of view has this absolute right, against which all the arguments of the exoterists are of no avail, since by very definition this matter lies completely outside their competence. Contrary to what takes place in 'conversion', nothing here implies the attribution of the superiority of one traditional form over another. It is merely a question of what one might call reasons of spiritual expediency, which is altogether different from simple individual 'preference', and for which exterior considerations are completely insignificant. Moreover, it is of course understood that one who can legitimately act in this way must, since he is truly capable of placing himself at the esoteric point of view, be conscious, at least by virtue of a theoretical if not an effectively realized knowledge, of the essential unity of all traditions. This alone is sufficient to show that when the word 'conversion' is applied to such a case, it is meaningless and truly inconceivable. If it is asked why there are such cases, we reply that is due above all to the conditions of the present age in which, on the one hand, certain traditions have become incomplete 'from above', that is, from their esoteric side, the existence of which their 'official' representatives sometimes even go so far as to more or less formally deny; and on the other hand, it too often happens that someone is born into a milieu not in harmony with his own nature, and because not really suitable for him, does not allow his possibilities, especially of the intellectual and spiritual order, to develop in a normal manner. Certainly it is regrettable in more than one respect that things are this way, but these are the inevitable drawbacks of the present phase of the *Kali-Yuga*.

Besides the case of those who 'take up their abode' in a traditional form because it puts at their disposal the most adequate means for the interior work they have yet to accomplish, there is another that we must also mention. This is the case of men who, having reached a high degree of spiritual development, adopt outwardly one or another traditional form according to circumstances and for reasons of which they are the sole judges, especially since these reasons are generally those which necessarily escape the understanding of

ordinary men. Because of the spiritual state they have reached, these men are beyond all forms, for whom they are only a matter of outward appearance, unable to affect or modify their inner reality in any way. Not only have they reached that understanding spoken of earlier, but they have fully realized, in its very principle, the fundamental unity of all traditions. To speak of 'conversion' in this case would be absurd. Nevertheless, this does not prevent certain people from writing seriously that Sri Ramakrishna, for example, had 'converted' to Islam during one period of his life and to Christianity during another. Nothing could be more ridiculous than such assertions, which give a rather sorry idea of the authors' mentality. For Sri Ramakrishna it was simply only a kind of 'verification' by direct experience of the validity of the different 'ways' represented by the traditions to which he temporarily assimilated himself. Is there anything in this that could closely or distantly resemble 'conversion' in any way?

Generally speaking, anyone who has an understanding of the unity of traditions, whether through a merely theoretical comprehension or through an effective realization, is necessarily for this very reason 'unconvertible' to anything whatsoever. Moreover, he is the only person who is truly so, since everyone else is always at the mercy of contingent circumstances to some degree. We cannot denounce too vigorously the equivocation that leads certain people to speak of 'conversion' where there is no trace of it, for it is important to put an end to all such nonsense widespread in the profane world, and beneath which it is not difficult to divine intentions that are clearly hostile to everything associated with esoterism.

13

CEREMONIALISM AND ESTHETICISM

We have already denounced the strange confusion between rites and ceremonies[1] which is often made in our time and which bears testimony to a complete misunderstanding of the true nature and essential characteristics of rites, we might even say of tradition in general. While rites, like everything that is of a truly traditional order, necessarily include a 'non-human' element, ceremonies, on the contrary, are purely human and cannot lay claim to anything more than effects strictly limited to this domain, one could say even to its most outward aspects, for these effects are in reality exclusively 'psychological' and, above all, emotional. Thus one can see in this confusion a particular case or a consequence of 'humanism', that is to say the modern tendency to reduce everything to the human level, a tendency manifested also by the attempt to explain the effects of rites themselves in a 'psychological' way, which effectively abolishes the essential difference between rites and ceremonies.

It is not a question of disputing the relative utility of ceremonies insofar as, by being incidentally joined to rites in a period of spiritual obscuration, they make the latter more accessible to the generality of men, whom they thus prepare as it were to receive the effects of the rites, because they can no longer be immediately reached except by such wholly outward means as the former. Yet in order for this role of 'adjuvant' to remain legitimate and indeed for it to be

1. See *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 19.

truly efficacious, the development of ceremonies must be kept within certain limits beyond which they rather risk having completely opposite consequences. This is what one sees only too often in the present state of Western religious forms, where the rites end up being truly smothered by the ceremonies. In such cases not only is the accidental too often taken as the essential, which gives birth to an excessive formalism empty of meaning, but the very 'thickness' of the ceremonial lining, if one may speak thus, presents a far from negligible obstacle to the action of spiritual influences. Here we have a true case of 'solidification' in the sense in which we have taken this word elsewhere,[2] which very much accords with the general character of the modern age.

This abuse, which can be named 'ceremonialism', is something strictly Western, which is easy to understand. Ceremonies always give the impression of something exceptional, and they communicate this appearance to the very rites upon which they have come to be superimposed. Now, the less a civilization is wholly traditional, the more the separation is accentuated between the diminished tradition and everything else, which is now considered purely profane and to constitute what is commonly called 'ordinary life', on which traditional elements no longer exercise any effective influence. It is quite evident that this separation has never been pushed as far as with modern Westerners; and in saying this we naturally mean to speak of those who still have kept something of their tradition but who, outside of the restricted role played in their lives by the 'practice of religion', are in no way distinct from others. In these conditions, everything belonging to tradition must take on the character of an exception with respect to the rest, which precisely emphasizes the display of ceremonies surrounding them. Thus, even granted that this is explained in part by the Western temperament, and that it corresponds to a kind of emotiveness which makes it more particularly sensible to ceremonies, it is nonetheless true that there are also more profound reasons directly linked to the extreme enfeeblement of the traditional spirit. It is also to be noted in this same order of ideas that when Westerners speak of spiritual things, or

2. See *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times.*

what they rightly or wrongly consider to be such,[3] they feel obliged to take an annoyingly solemn tone, as if better to indicate that these things have nothing in common with the usual subjects of their conversations. Whatever they may think, this affectation of 'ceremoniousness' assuredly has no connection with the dignity and seriousness appropriate to everything of a traditional order, and which never exclude the most perfect naturalness and greatest simplicity of attitude, as one can still see today in the East.[4]

There is another side to the question which we did not mention earlier, but upon which it seems necessary to dwell somewhat. We are speaking of the connection that exists for Westerners between 'ceremonialism' and what can be called 'estheticism'. By this latter word we naturally mean the particular mentality that proceeds from the 'esthetic' point of view, which applies first and most properly to art, but is extended bit by bit to other domains and finally puts a particular 'coloring' on the way that men look at everything. As its name indicates, the 'esthetic' point of view is that which attempts to reduce everything to a simple question of 'sensibility'; this is the modern and profane idea of art which, as A.K. Coomaraswamy has shown in numerous writings, is opposed to its normal and traditional conception. It removes all intellectuality and, one could even say, all intelligibility from whatever it is applied to, and the beautiful, far from being the 'splendor of the true', as it was defined in past

3. We add this restriction because of the many counterfeits of spirituality current among our contemporaries; but it suffices that they be convinced that it is spirituality, or that they wish to convince others so, for the same observation to apply in all cases.

4. This is particularly manifest in the case of Islam, which naturally has many rites but not a single ceremony. On the other hand, even in the West one can see in the sermons that have been preserved from the Middle Ages that the preachers of that truly religious period did not at all disdain to use a familiar and sometimes even humorous tone.

A rather significant fact is the deviation current usage has imposed on the word 'pontiff' and its derivatives. For the ordinary Westerner, who is ignorant of their traditional and symbolic value, these words have come to represent nothing more than the most excessive 'ceremonialism', as if the essential function of the pontificate were not the accomplishment of certain rites but only the conducting of particularly pompous ceremonies.

ages, is reduced to no more than whatever produces a certain sentiment of pleasure, and therefore something purely 'psychological' and 'subjective'. It is thus easy to understand how the taste for ceremonies is attached to this point of view, for ceremonies have effects that are only of the esthetic order and could not have any others; just like modern art, they are neither something to be understood nor something with a more or less profound meaning to be penetrated, but are merely leave an 'impression' in a wholly sentimental manner. All of this reaches only the most superficial and illusory part of the psychic being, which varies not only from one individual to another but also within the same individual according to his dispositions of the moment. This sentimental domain is indeed, in all respects, the most complete and the most extreme type of what one could call 'subjectivity' in its pure state.[5]

What we are saying about the taste for ceremonies properly so called also applies of course to the excessive and in a way disproportionate importance that some attribute to everything belonging to outward 'decor', sometimes going so far, even with things of an authentically traditional order, as to make this contingent accessory an indispensable and essential element, while others imagine that rites would lose all their value if not accompanied by more or less 'imposing' ceremonies. It is perhaps even more evident here that this is fundamentally a matter of 'estheticism', and even when those who are thus attached to 'decor' assure us that they are so because of the significance that they recognize in it, we are not certain but that they perhaps deceive themselves and are attracted rather especially by something much more outward and 'subjective', by an 'artistic' impression in the modern sense of the word. The least one can say is that the confusion between the accidental and the essential, which in any case exists, is always the sign of a very imperfect comprehension. Thus, for example, among those who admire the art of the

5. We do not have to speak here of certain forms of modern art which can produce the effects of disequilibrium and even 'disintegration', the repercussions of which can be quite far-reaching. This is no longer merely a matter of the insignificance, in the proper sense of the word, that attaches to everything purely profane, but is, indeed, a true work of 'subversion'.

Middle Ages, even when they are sincerely persuaded that their admiration is not simply 'esthetic' as was that of the 'romantics', and that the principal motive is the spirituality expressed by this art, we doubt that there are many who truly understand it and who are capable of making the necessary effort to see it otherwise than with modern eyes, that is, to really place themselves in the state of mind of those who produced this art and of those for whom it was intended. Among those who take pleasure in surrounding themselves with the 'decor' of that period, to a greater or lesser degree one almost always finds, if not strictly speaking the mentality, at least the 'perspective' of the architects who build in 'neo-gothic' style, or of the modern painters who try to imitate the works of 'primitives'. In these reconstitutions there is always something artificial and 'ceremonious', something that 'rings false', one might say, and that rather recalls the 'exhibition' or 'museum' much more than the real and normal use of works of art in a traditional civilization. To say it all in a word, one has the clear impression that the 'spirit' is absent.[6]

What we have just said about the Middle Ages in order to provide an example from the Western world itself could also be said, and with even more reason, in cases of Eastern 'decor'. It is indeed rare that even when composed of authentic elements, these do not rather represent above all the whole idea that Westerners have formed of the East, something having only a very distant relation to what the East really is in itself.[7] This leads us to clarify yet another

6. In the same order of ideas, we will point out incidentally the case of so-called 'folk' festivals so fashionable today. These attempts to reconstitute ancient 'popular' festivals, even when based on the most exact documentation and the most scrupulous erudition, inevitably have a pathetic air of 'masquerade' and of gross counterfeit that could make one believe in an intention to 'parody' that certainly does not exist among their organizers.

7. To take an extreme example, one that is thereby more 'tangible', the works of most of the painters called 'orientalists' show only too well what the Western perspective applied to things of the East can lead to. There is no doubt that they have really taken as their models Oriental people, things and landscapes, but since they have only seen them in a wholly outward fashion, their manner of 'rendering' them is worth about as much as the creations of the 'folklorists' of whom we have just spoken.

important point: among the many manifestations of modern 'estheticism' one must single out the taste for the 'exotic' so frequently witnessed among our contemporaries, a taste which, whatever the different factors that may have contributed to its spread (and which would take too long to examine here in detail), once again finally comes down to a sort of 'artistic' sensibility foreign to any true comprehension, and this, unfortunately, among those who do nothing but 'follow' and imitate others, even to a mere question of fashion, as is the case with the admiration affected for one or another form of art, which varies from one moment to the next according to circumstances. But the case of the 'exotic' concerns us somehow more directly than any other, because it is greatly to be feared that the very interest in Eastern doctrines manifested by some people is too often due to this tendency; when such is the case, it is evident that one is dealing with a purely outward 'attitude' that cannot be taken seriously. What complicates matters is that this same tendency can also be mixed in varying proportions with a much more real and sincere interest; this case is certainly not as hopeless as the other, but what must then be taken into account is that one can never arrive at a true comprehension of any doctrine until the impression of 'exoticism' that it might have had initially should have disappeared entirely. This can require a preliminary effort that is considerable and even painful for some but which is strictly indispensable if they wish to obtain any valid result from the studies they have undertaken. If this is impossible, which naturally sometimes happens, this is because one is dealing with Westerners who, because of their special psychic constitution, can never cease being what they are and who consequently would do much better to remain so entirely and frankly and to renounce occupying themselves with things from which they can draw no real profit, for whatever they do, these things will always be for them in 'another world' having no connection to the one to which they in fact belong and which they are incapable to leaving. We will add that these remarks are particularly important in the case of Westerners by birth who, for one reason or another, and especially for reasons of an esoteric and initiatic order—the only reasons we can consider

worthy of interest[8]—have decided to join an Eastern tradition; in fact, here we have a true question of 'qualification' which is imposed on them and which in all strictness ought to be the object of a sort of preliminary 'trial' before any question of a real and effective adherence. In any case, and even in the most favorable conditions, such people must be very much convinced that, as long as they find the slightest 'exotic' character in the traditional form they have adopted, this is incontestable proof that they have not truly assimilated the form, and that, whatever the appearances, it remains something exterior to their real being and modifies it only superficially. This is one of the first obstacles such people encounter on their way, and experience obliges us to recognize that, for many, this is perhaps not the least difficult to overcome.

8. On this subject, see the preceding chapter, 'Conversions'.

14

RECENT CONFUSIONS

A FEW YEARS AGO we had to report the strange attitude of those who feel the need to deliberately confuse esoterism with mysticism, or even, speaking more exactly, to expound things in such a way as to entirely substitute mysticism for esoterism whenever they encounter it, particularly in Eastern doctrines.[1] This confusion first arose among the orientalists, and at the beginning may have simply been due to their incomprehension, of which there are so many other proofs that one need not be too surprised at it. But the matter becomes much more serious when in certain religious circles this confusion is seized upon for motives that are visibly much more conscious and with a prejudice that is no longer merely one of forcing everything willy-nilly into Western categories. These circles were formerly content simply with denying the existence of all esoterism, which is obviously the easiest attitude because it dispenses with the need to examine more deeply something that is particularly inconvenient, which it is for those who, like the exclusive exoterists, claim that nothing escapes their competence. But it seems that at a certain moment they realized that this total and 'simplistic' negation was no longer possible and that it was also more clever to misrepresent esoterism in such a way as to 'annex' it by assimilating it to something which, like mysticism, really belongs only to religious exoterism. Thus one could still forego use of the word esoterism, since the word mysticism everywhere took its place, and the

1. See *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 1.

thing itself was thereby so travestied that it seemed to enter into the exoteric domain, which was no doubt what was essential for their proposed aims and allowed some people to make random 'judgments' about things they were not in the least qualified to appreciate and which, by their true nature, were from every point of view entirely outside their 'jurisdiction'.

Most recently we have noted yet another change of attitude, and, we will freely say, a change of tactics, for it goes without saying that in all of this it is not simply a matter of an attitude which, as erroneous as it may be, could at least pass for being disinterested, as one can concede in the case of most orientalists.[2] What is rather curious is that this new attitude began to show itself precisely in the same circles as the preceding, as well as in others which adhered rather closely to them, judging from the fact that the same people appear in both.[3] Now, there is no longer any hesitation to speak plainly of esoterism, as if this word had suddenly ceased to be frightening to certain people; what could have happened to make them come to this point? No doubt it would be rather difficult to say exactly, but one is permitted to suppose that in one way or another the existence of esoterism has become too evident a truth for them to continue to pass over in silence, or to hold that esoterism is nothing more than mysticism; to tell the truth, we fear that we ourselves count for something in the rather painful discomfiture that this finding must have caused in these circles, but that is the way things are and we can do nothing about it. One must resign oneself to it and do one's best to accommodate oneself to changes in the circumstances of the milieu in which one lives! This moreover is what people are keen to

2. We say 'most' for obviously an exception must be made for certain orientalists who are found to have at the same time more or less close links with the religious circles in question.

3. We have already given an example of the attitude in question in our recent book reviews, in connection with a new book, and we will shortly have occasion to give others. But it is well understood that for the moment we are keeping to more general considerations, without going into the particular and detailed examination of certain individual cases (and we also mean groups and their agents as well as individual persons), which will be better done elsewhere at the appropriate place.

do, but this is not to say that we must congratulate ourselves overmuch, for there are hardly any illusions about what one could call the 'quality' of this change. Indeed, it is not sufficient for us that the existence of esoterism as such finally be recognized; it is also necessary for us to see how it is presented and how it is discussed, and, as we ought to have expected, it is just here that things deteriorate in a rather singular way.

First of all, these people seem to admit not only the existence of esoterism but also, to a degree, its validity, especially under the cover of symbolism, although it is not always easy to know what some of them really think because they seem to try hard never to dispel entirely the ambiguities that enter into their writings (and we do not wish to wrong them by believing that this is solely incompetence on their part); and surely it is already something appreciable that, as regards symbolism, they are no longer content with the annoying banality of current exoteric interpretations and the shallow 'moralism' which usually inspires them. Nonetheless, we will readily say that in certain respects, they sometimes go too far in the sense that, to these very legitimate considerations, they mix others from a wholly fantastic pseudo-symbolism that is impossible to take seriously. Should one see here only the effect of a certain inexperience in this domain where nothing can be improvised? Something of this is very possible, but there may also be something else; one could even say that this mélange is expressly made to devalue symbolism and esoterism, and yet we cannot believe that this is the intention of those who write these things, for they would then have to resign themselves to seeing this discredit recoil upon themselves and their own work. But it is less certain that this intention does not exist in any way among those who direct them, for it goes without saying that in such cases all are not equally conscious of the underlying motives for the 'tactics' in which they collaborate. However this may be, until we have proof to the contrary we prefer to think that what is involved is only a 'minimizing' of the esoterism they can no longer deny (this is what a proverb calls 'keeping the fire from spreading'), of reducing its scope as much as possible by introducing questions that are of no real importance, and that are even

wholly insignificant, 'amusements' for a public that is naturally only too disposed to form an idea of esoterism itself after these little things which, much more than all the rest, are to the measure of its powers of comprehension.[4]

This however is not what is most serious; there is something else that seems even more disquieting in certain respects: the inextricable mixing of true esoterism with its many contemporary deformations and counterfeits, occultist, Theosophist, and others, and the practice of drawing notions and references from each indiscriminately and then presenting them as if they were all on the same plane so to speak, while refraining from indicating clearly what one accepts and what one rejects. Is this only ignorance or a lack of discernment? Indeed, these latter may often play a role in such cases, and moreover the 'directors' often know very well how to use them for their own ends; but it is unfortunately impossible for this to be all there is to the present case, for we are entirely certain that among those who act thus are those who are perfectly aware of what is really happening. How then should we qualify this way of proceeding, which seems expressly calculated to cause trouble and confusion in the minds of their readers? Besides, since this is not an isolated case but a general tendency among those of whom we speak, it indeed seems that a 'preconceived' plan is involved; naturally one can see in this a new example of the modern disorder that more and more extends everywhere, and without which confusions of this kind could scarcely occur, much less spread. But this is not a sufficient explanation and once again we must ask what more precise intentions underlie all of this? Perhaps it is too early to distinguish them clearly, and it is best to wait a while in order to see in what direction this 'movement' will develop; but when everything is

4. We know of one ecclesiastic who, after expounding views of incontestable interest about symbolism, later thought himself obliged, not to renounce them, but to attenuate them by declaring that he attached to them only a very secondary importance and considered them doctrinally insignificant. This seems to support what we were saying about the deliberate 'belittling' of esoterism, which moreover can be accomplished in many apparently contrary ways by making out as important what is not so, and by belittling what really is.

thus confounded, is it not in the first place a question of transferring to authentic esoterism something of the suspicion that very legitimately attaches to its counterfeits? This might seem to contradict the very acceptance of esoterism, but we are not quite sure that this is really so, and this is why. First, the very fact of the ambiguities to which we alluded above means that this acceptance is only 'in principle' as it were and does not actually bears on anything clearly defined; then, although they refrain from any assessment of the whole, from time to time they throw out malicious insinuations, which almost always happen to be directed against true esoterism. These remarks lead one to ask whether in the final analysis it is simply a matter of preparing the establishment of a new pseudo-esoterism of a rather particular kind meant to give an appearance of satisfaction to those who are no longer content with exoterism, while at the same time diverting them from the true esoterism to which they intend to oppose it.[5] If this is the case, since this pseudo-esoterism—of which perhaps we already have a few samples in the fantasies and the 'amusements' mentioned—is probably still quite far from being entirely 'complete', it would be understandable that, while waiting for it to be so, they should have every interest in remaining vague, with the idea of going forth and openly taking the offensive at the right moment, and in this way all would be quite well explained. Of course, until we know more we can only present what we have just said as a hypothesis, but all who know the mentality of certain people will surely recognize that it does not lack plausibility; and as for ourselves, for some time now we have received from various sources accounts of claimed initiations that, however inconsistent they may be, also confirm this.

We do not wish to say anything more about this for the moment, but we were obliged not to wait longer to warn those who, with the best faith in the world, risk letting themselves be too easily seduced

5. The incorporation of certain really traditional elements does not prevent it, as a 'construction' and as a whole, from being only a pseudo-esoterism; besides, the occultists themselves have proceeded in this way, although for different reasons and much less consciously.

by certain deceptive appearances; and we will be only too happy if, as sometimes happens, the mere fact of exposing these things is sufficient to arrest their development before they go too far. We will add that, at a much lower level than this, we have recently also observed confusions which are in the final analysis of the same sort, and with these at least the intention is in no way doubtful: this is manifestly to try to assimilate esoterism with its worst counterfeits, and the representatives of traditional initiatic organizations with the charlatans of the various pseudo-initiations. There is assuredly a difference between these crude ignominies, against which one cannot protest too strongly, and certain much more subtle maneuvers; but fundamentally does not all of this tend in the same direction, and are not the most clever and insidious attempts, by this very fact, also the most dangerous?

15

'INTELLECTUAL PRIDE'

In the foregoing chapter about the new attitude taken toward esoterism in certain religious circles we said that from time to time, and as it were incidentally, the accounts concerning this order of things introduce certain ill-willed insinuations which, even if not a result of any well-defined intention, nevertheless accord poorly with the very admission of esoterism, be this admission only as it were 'in principle'. Among these insinuations is one we think it not pointless to reexamine more particularly. This is the reproach of 'intellectual pride', which is certainly nothing new—far from it—but which reappears here once again and, rather strangely, is always aimed at those who adhere to the most authentically traditional esoteric doctrines. Must one thereby conclude that they are considered to be more troublesome than the counterfeiters of all kinds? This is indeed very possible, and in such cases moreover the counterfeiters are doubtless rather to be regarded as having to be treated gently since, as we have noted, they create the most troubling confusions and by this very fact are auxiliaries (assuredly involuntary but no less useful for all that) of the new 'tactic' believed to be necessary in confronting the circumstances.

The expression 'intellectual pride' is manifestly self-contradictory, for if words still have a definite meaning—but we are sometimes tempted to doubt this is so for most of our contemporaries—pride can only be of a purely sentimental order. In a certain sense one could speak of pride in connection with reason because this belongs to the individual order just as sentiment does, so that between the one and the other reciprocal reactions are always possible. But how could this be so in the order of pure intellectuality, which is essentially supra-individual? And once it is by hypothesis a

matter of esoterism, it is obvious that there can be no question of reason but only of the transcendent intellect, either directly, as in the case of true metaphysical and initiatic realization, or at least indirectly, but yet also quite real, as in the case of knowledge that is still merely theoretical, since in each case it is a question of things that reason is incapable of attaining. This moreover is why the rationalists are always so bent on denying its existence; esoterism inconveniences them as much as it does the most exclusive religious exo-terists, although naturally for very different reasons; but, motives aside, this is in fact a rather curious 'conjunction'.

At bottom, the reproach in question might seem to be inspired above all by the modern mania for equality that will not suffer anything that surpasses the 'average'; but what is most astonishing is to see similar prejudices, which are the sign of a clearly anti-traditional mentality shared by people who claim a tradition, even if only from the exoteric point of view. This certainly proves that they are seriously affected by the modern spirit, although they probably are not aware of it themselves; and this is yet one more of the contradictions so frequent in our time which one is really obliged to note even while one is astonished that they should generally pass so unnoticed. But this contradiction reaches its most extreme degree when it is found, not among those who are resolved to admit nothing other than exoterism and declare this expressly, but, as here, among those who seem to accept a certain esoterism, whatever be its value and authenticity, for after all they should at least realize that the same reproach could also be made against them by intransigent exoterists. Must it be concluded from this that their claim to esoterism ultimately is only a mask, and that its purpose is above all to bring back to the 'herd' those who might be tempted to leave it were a way not found to divert them from true esoterism? If this were so, it would explain everything quite nicely, with the accusation of 'intellectual pride' then raised up before them as a sort of bogeyman, while at the same time the presentation of some pseudo-esoterism or other would give their aspirations an illusory and wholly inoffensive satisfaction. Once again, to deny the plausibility of this hypothesis would presume of very defective knowledge of the mentality of certain circles.

Now, regarding this alleged 'intellectual pride', we can go further toward the heart of the matter. It would be a strange pride indeed that ends by denying any value to the individuality in itself by making it appear as strictly null in comparison with the Principle. In short, this reproach proceeds from exactly the same incomprehension as that of egoism, which is sometimes also leveled at anyone who seeks to attain final Deliverance. How can one speak of 'egoism' where by very definition there is no longer any ego? It would be, if not more just, at least more logical, to see egoism in the preoccupation with 'salvation' (which does not, of course, at all mean that the latter is illegitimate), or to find the mark of a certain pride in the desire to 'immortalize' the individuality instead of striving to go beyond it. The exoterists ought well to reflect on this, for it would make them a bit more circumspect in the accusations they hurl so thoughtlessly. In connection with the being that attains Deliverance, we will further add that such realization of a universal order has consequences that are very much more extensive and effective than common 'altruism', which is but a concern for the interests of a mere collectivity and which consequently in no way leaves the individual order; in the supra-individual order where there is no longer any 'I', there is likewise no longer any 'other', because this is a domain where all beings are one, 'fused but not confused' according to Eckhart's expression, and thereby they truly realize the words of Christ, 'That they may be one even as the Father and I are one.'

What is true of pride is equally true of humility, which, being its contrary, is situated exactly on the same level, and which has the same exclusively sentimental and individual character. But, in a wholly different order, there is something which, spiritually, is much more valuable than this humility, and this is 'spiritual poverty' understood in its true meaning, that is the recognition one's total dependence on the Principle; and who could have a more real and more complete consciousness of this than true esoterists? We will go even further: today, who other than these is still truly aware of this to any degree; and even among the adherents of traditional exoterism, except perhaps for certain ever rarer exceptions, is there anything more than a wholly verbal and outward affirmation of this? We strongly doubt it for this profound reason: to use the terms

of the Far-Eastern tradition, which allow us to express most easily what we want to say here, the fully 'normal' man must be *yin* with respect to the Principle, but to the Principle alone, and by reason of his 'central' position he must be *yang* in relation to all manifestation. On the contrary, fallen man adopts an attitude by which he tends more and more to become *yang* in relation to the Principle (or rather gives himself the illusion of doing so, for it goes without saying that this is an impossibility) and *yin* in relation to manifestation; and it is from this that both pride and humility are born. When the fall reaches its last phase, pride finally results in the negation of the Principle, and humility the negation of all hierarchy; the religious exoterists obviously refuse the first of these two negations; indeed, they reject it with a true horror when it takes on the name of atheism. But, on the contrary, we often have the impression that they are not very far removed from the second![1]

1. We will take advantage of this occasion to note in passing a particularly grotesque reproach made against us which, in the final analysis, belongs to the same order of ideas, that is to say the intrusion of sentimentality into a domain to which it has no legitimate access. It seems that our writings have the serious defect of 'lacking joy'! That certain things bring us joy or not depends in any case only on our own individual dispositions, and in themselves these things have nothing to do with the matter, being wholly independent of such contingencies. This cannot and must not be of interest to anyone, and it would be perfectly ridiculous and improper to introduce anything like this into an exposition of traditional doctrines in regard to which individualities, ours as well as any other's, count for absolutely nothing.